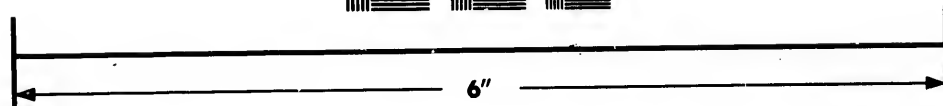
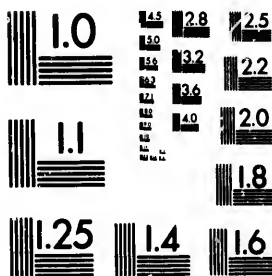


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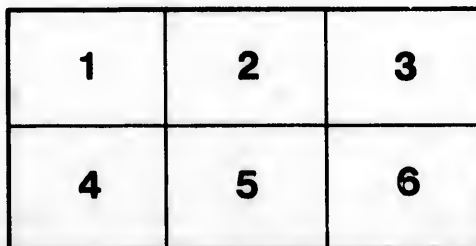
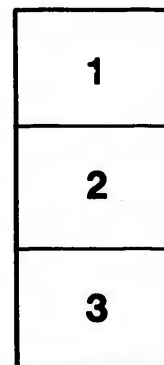
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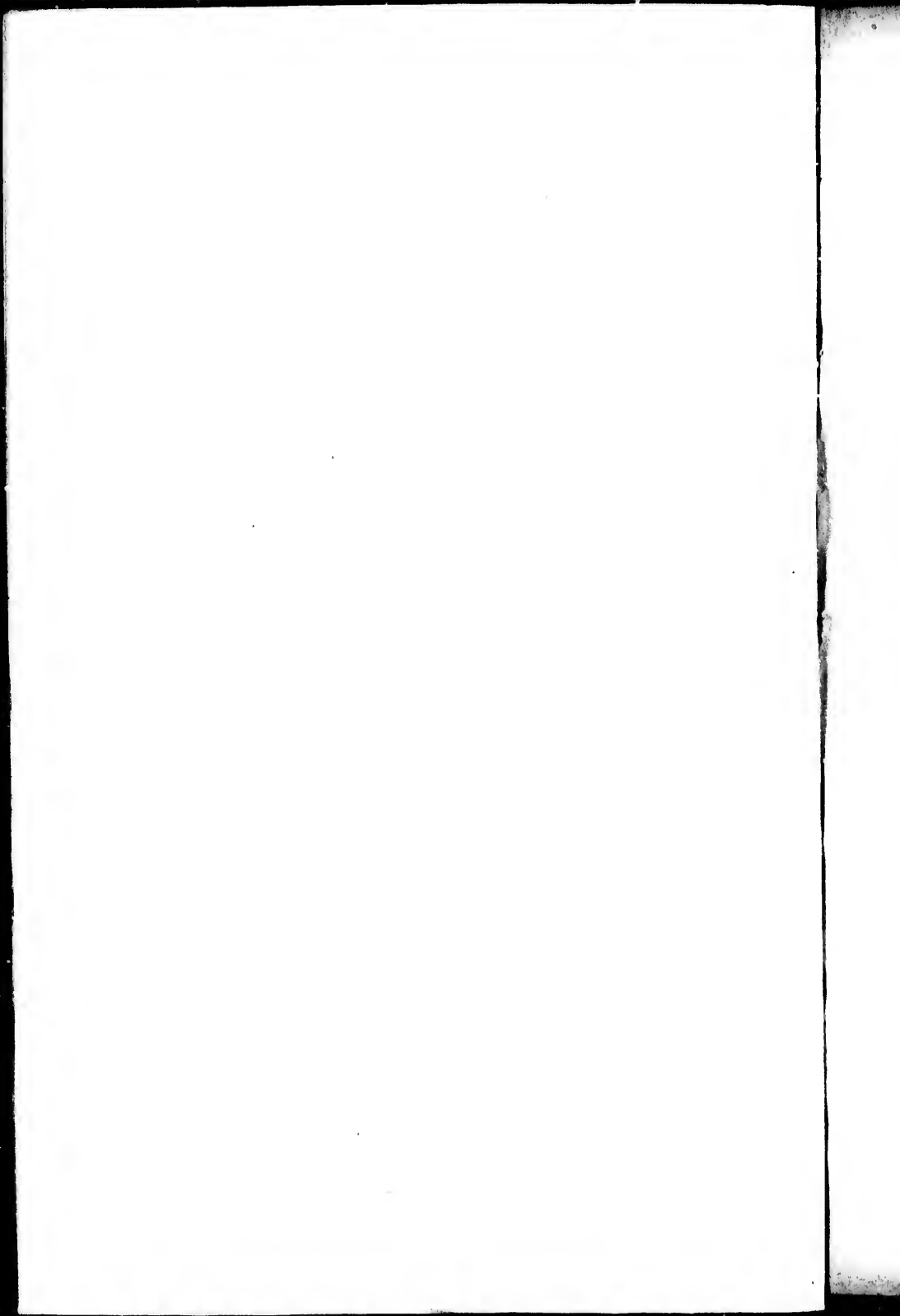
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THE
COMMERCIAL POLICY
OF
PITT AND PEEL.

1785—1846.

LONDON:
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET.

1847.

¹⁸⁶⁴
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COMMERCIAL POLICY OF PITT AND PEEL.

1785—1846.

It is not the writer's intention to enter upon any examination of the merits of the commercial measures which in the course of last year obtained the sanction of the legislature. His object is merely to lay before that large and influential portion of the community to whom those measures were distasteful, some considerations which may induce them to pause before taking up a position of irreconcilable hostility to men, with whom they cordially acted during ten years of opposition, carried on upon grounds altogether irrespective of any question affecting the removal of commercial restrictions.

Not that the writer is indifferent to the success of Sir Robert Peel's measures. No true follower of Mr. Pitt can feel otherwise than anxious that they should be crowned with success; for they are founded upon principles of commercial policy which were for the first time attempted to be reduced to practice by that statesman in 1785—which were afterwards embodied by him in the French commercial treaty of 1787—which were acted upon to a very considerable extent by Mr. Huskisson during the administrations of Lord Liverpool and Mr. Canning, the pupils and successors of Mr. Pitt—and which, after having remained in

abeyance under the Whigs from 1830 to 1841, were more fully carried out by Sir Robert Peel from the date of his accession to office in the latter of these years.

That those principles are sound in theory has seldom been disputed by any statesman of eminence since the death of Mr. Fox, who was decidedly opposed to them.* He led the opposition of the English farmer and manufacturer to the removal of restrictions from Irish commerce in 1785, and he headed the opposition to the French treaty of 1787. From that period till the termination of the French revolutionary war the preservation of the British empire from foreign aggression occupied the attention of British statesmen, to the exclusion of any questions affecting our commercial relations. But upon the restoration of peace those questions soon became the subject of discussion; and among the members of the Tory Government of that day there was no difference of opinion as to the propriety of introducing a more liberal system of commercial policy than had before been in operation. Under the immediate direction of the late Lord Wallace, of the Earl of Ripon, and of Mr. Huskisson, measure after measure was introduced from 1818 to 1828, all of them based upon the principle of relieving commerce of every restriction that could be dispensed with consistently with the security of the revenue and with what was due to the general interests of the empire. The gradual removal of such restrictions,

* "We must in candour admit and lament that those maxims of policy taught by Dr. Adam Smith, which bind nations together by the reciprocal benefits of commerce, produced less effect on the minds of the Whig leaders than on that of Mr. Pitt."—'Article on Earls Grey and Spencer,' *Edinburgh Review* for January, 1846, p. 241.

and a preference for direct to indirect taxation, was throughout the policy of Lord Liverpool's administration; and by the time Mr. Huskisson's measures were fully developed, all statesmen of eminence were satisfied that Free Trade principles must sooner or later become predominant. The only point on which any difference of opinion prevailed was, as to the time when those principles could be extensively applied with safety. Whether that period had arrived in 1846 can only be determined by the result. The measures of that very remarkable Session are now in full operation, whether for good or for evil remains to be proved; and it seems to be almost universally admitted that they must, for some time at least, form the basis of the commercial policy of the country. Any discussion therefore of their merits, or of their probable effects, would be here out of place. For although indications have from time to time been made of its being the intention of a certain section of the Protectionists, with Lord George Bentinck at their head, to agitate for a repeal of those measures, the general impression is that no such attempt will be made. The projected plan of operations is said to have met with no support from Lord Stanley, the only tried statesman of the party. It has been openly disavowed by the Duke of Rutland, by Sir Edward Knatchbull, and by other leading agriculturists; and the result is, that but a very small portion of the space of the daily or periodical press is occupied with the consideration either of the policy of the measures or the propriety of their repeal.

Very different, however, is the course that has been pursued with reference to that portion of the Conservative party who supported those measures, and to

the character and conduct of the men who introduced them. As the discussion of the merits and tendency of the measures died away, very much in the same proportion did the abuse of their authors and supporters increase. The characters of those men as statesmen and legislators are not, it is said, to be judged of by the result. Even if, upon receiving that fair trial which all parties profess to be ready to give them, the measures of 1846 should turn out to be the most beneficial that ever were devised; if in the course of a few years the trade and commerce and agriculture of the country should all arrive at a hitherto unexampled state of prosperity; and if by all reasonable men that prosperity could be traced to the Session of 1846, and to the financial policy of the late Administration, still all this matters not, the promoters of that policy are in every event to be condemned, they are never again to be trusted, but to be for ever cashiered from the service of the public.

A portion of the Conservative press which long after the passing of the Corn Law of 1842, of Lord Stanley's Canada Corn Bill of 1843, and of the commercial reforms of 1842, 1844, and 1845, were loudest in their praises of these measures and of the conduct and character of Sir Robert Peel, have since become the most lavish of their abuse: and from the date of his resignation in 1846 down to the meeting of Parliament in 1847, no language was violent enough for the expression of their detestation of the man and their abhorrence of his conduct. The policy even of measures which some of them aided in carrying has lately been called in question. The additional grant to Maynooth, for instance, in favour of

which Lord Stanley and Lord George Bentinck voted, and which the former introduced into the House of Lords, was not long ago selected as a fit subject for insinuating reflections against Sir Robert Peel * by a Conservative newspaper which decidedly advocated that measure in 1845.† Lord Lincoln's declaration of opinion at Manchester upon the endowment of the Irish Roman Catholic clergy was at once assumed to be the opinion of Sir Robert Peel; and although Lord Stanley voted in the majority for the endowment of the Irish priests in 1825, he is nevertheless selected as a fit champion of Protestantism, while Sir Robert Peel is held up to public execration as the enemy of the Protestant faith simply because he is suspected of entertaining similar opinions.

But this proscription from the public service cannot in fairness be limited to Sir Robert Peel and the members of his Government. It applies to every Conservative in Parliament who voted for the measures, and to every Conservative out of Parliament who was ready to support them. It is true, indeed,

* While these pages are passing through the press, Mr. Manners Sutton's "Address to the Electors of Cambridge" has been circulated. The following extract from that document will suffice to show, on how little foundation these opinions have been ascribed to Sir Robert Peel:—

"As respects Sir Robert Peel, I felt myself justified in communicating with him in consequence of the assertions and surmises of Mr. Campbell. I was informed by Sir Robert Peel, and was authorized by him to state, that he had fully expressed his opinions on the matter referred to by Mr. Campbell, in the debate on the second reading of the Maynooth College Bill, on the 18th of April, 1845: that these opinions were correctly reported at the time; that to these opinions, on again referring to them, he now adheres without any qualification; and that he has given no authority to any person to make any declaration on his behalf on the subject of Roman Catholic endowment, or on any other subject whatever.

† See *Standard* of January 18, 1847, as contrasted with same paper in March, 1845.

that the 'Quarterly Review,' in the number for October, 1846, in effect admitted the propriety of limiting this proscription to Sir Robert Peel and a few of his more immediate adherents, and of allowing the greater portion of the 112 to reunite with the Protectionists, provided they would confess that they had done wrong and would promise to behave better for the future. But there is evidently little or no chance of this arrangement taking place. Those members of the Conservative party who supported the measures of 1846 will not, for they cannot in fairness, submit to Sir Robert Peel being proscribed alone. And it is plain that upon the very same grounds on which sentence of proscription is pronounced against him, must a similar sentence be pronounced against all Conservatives who supported him. A portion of the public press, which up to 1846 were the steady adherents of the late Ministry, have accordingly found it necessary to include all in their proscription. The Whigs were "the first for Free Trade" was the cry, when, in anticipation of a general election in the autumn of 1846, an attempt was made, in ignorance, real or pretended, of the true state of the facts, to detach the Conservative Free-traders from the party of Sir Robert Peel: "select the Whigs," they have on that score "the first claim" to your support,—and somewhat similar recommendations are being repeated, now that there are again rumours of a speedy dissolution of Parliament.

In giving this advice the Protectionist organs are consistent. If Sir Robert Peel's conduct, and that of the members of his Administration in 1846, was such as to merit one tithe of the abuse that has been heaped upon them, it is very plain that the proscription from public life cannot stop with them. The fault could,

indeed, in no case easily admit of expiation. For what are the grounds on which this proposed exclusion is rested? The accusation brought against them is, that they have betrayed their friends and party by abandoning Conservative principles, and adopting the Free Trade doctrines of the Whigs. The charge is a serious one, and ought not to be entertained except on evidence of the clearest description. It may, however, confidently be asserted that no such evidence has been or can be adduced. It is, on the contrary, believed that a conclusive case may be made out in disproof of any such allegations. One might have expected that the fact of so large a number of Conservatives, distinguished as well for influence as for independence of character, throughout the country, having supported the measures of 1846, would of itself have gone far to silence any doubts as to the sincerity of the Ministers who introduced them. One would have thought that the circumstance of the Duke of Wellington appearing as a supporter of the policy of 1846 should have afforded a conclusive guarantee, not perhaps of its necessity, but certainly that there was nothing treacherous or dishonourable in the conduct of those by whom it was advocated, and to whom he gave the sanction of his support.

But it is not so. The matter has not been so viewed in many most respectable quarters. The charge has been so loudly and so generally asserted, and the impression of there having been some dishonesty and treachery at the bottom of the measures of 1846, has taken such complete possession of the minds of a large body of Conservatives, that the sagacity, the spotless purity of character, and perfect independence of many of the supporters of the late Ministry, is allowed to weigh nothing in the balance against these precon-

ceived impressions.* The result of all this is, that most of the ultra Protectionists view with indifference, if they do not actually recommend, a course of proceedings which must infallibly lead to the permanent exclusion from any share in the management of public affairs, not only of all the late Ministers, but of almost all those Conservative Peers and Commoners who considered it their duty to support their measures. It is no light matter thus to endeavour to discredit the character of public men, comprising some of the ablest practical statesmen the country ever possessed. It is, therefore, hoped that no candid person will withhold an impartial consideration from remarks tending to show that in carrying out the measures of 1846 the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel were not adopting the policy of their opponents; were not abandoning Conservative principles; that there was nothing, in short, in their conduct to justify the withdrawal of public confidence, or any permanent separation between that portion of the Conservatives who supported them, and the large body of Conservatives who opposed them.

This charge of pirating the Free-trade principles of

* One circumstance on which this charge of dishonesty is mainly rested is, the allegation that Sir Robert Peel was frightened into a change of opinion by Lord John Russell's letter to the electors of London in November, 1845. It is believed that the constant reiteration of this statement has had more effect than any other connected with the repeal of the Corn Laws in leading men favourably inclined towards the late Administration to doubt their sincerity. A reference to dates will suffice to show that the charge is unfounded. That Lord John Russell may have heard rumours of differences in the Cabinet, and of the cause of these differences, before he wrote his letter, is possible; but it is utterly impossible that his letter can have led to Sir Robert Peel's calling his Cabinet together to consider the question: because the letter is dated Edinburgh, 22nd Nov. 1845; whereas the meeting of the Cabinet at which Sir Robert Peel broached his plan of opening the ports, with a view to the reconsideration of the Corn Laws, was held *three weeks before*, viz. *on the 1st of November*.

the Whigs is not new. It was repeatedly brought against Lord Liverpool's Government in 1826, till it was satisfactorily answered by Mr. Canning. It was urged against Sir Robert Peel's Ministry in 1842, and refuted by Mr. Disraeli. It was renewed in 1846 by the supporters of Lord George Bentinck, the pretended pupil of Mr. Canning, and now the leader of Mr. Disraeli.

It is to the credit of the Whigs that this charge did not originate with them. It originated with a section of the general supporters of the Government in 1826, who professing to be followers of Mr. Pitt, but forgetting that he was the first promoter of the principles of Free Trade, thought to damage the commercial policy of Lord Liverpool's ministry by fathering it on the Whig party, whose character had not then recovered the shock it had sustained through the coalition of Mr. Fox with Lord North forty years before. But although the charge did not originate with the Whigs in 1826, many of them were not slow to countenance it in 1842 and 1846; and the self-complacent manner in which Lord John Russell has accepted the compliments paid to him by Lord George Bentinck as a consistent supporter of Free Trade, in contradistinction to Sir Robert Peel, is not very creditable to the candour of the present Prime Minister. He must know full well that his career as a practical Free Trader was unheard of until 1841. Under the pretext of bettering the revenue, the Administration of which he was then a member attempted to make a partial and invidious application of Free Trade principles. That attempt was successfully resisted, as not calculated to confer any general benefit, while it pressed most injuriously on particular interests, and as being in reality not a *bonâ fide* well digested reform, but a

desperate effort to prop up "for awhile a tottering Administration,"* which had brought the country to the verge of national bankruptcy.

To the charge brought against Lord Liverpool's Government, that they had adopted the principles of the Whigs, Mr. Canning made the following reply in the debate on the effects of Mr. Huskisson's Free Trade system on the silk manufacture, in February, 1826 :—

"Two objections have been stated to the course which his Majesty's Ministers are pursuing, under the guidance of my Right Honourable friend. We are charged with having abandoned the principles of Mr. Pitt, and having borrowed a leaf from the book of Whig policy. If the latter accusation refers to the useful and honourable support which we have received on questions of commerce from some of those who are habitually our antagonists in politics, I have only to admit the fact, and to declare the satisfaction which I derive from it. God forbid, Sir, that I should withhold due praise from those who, forgetting political animosities, and the vulgar divisions of party, have concurred with us in attempting to do public good.

"But if it is meant to say that the commercial policy which we recommend to the country is founded on the principles of Whiggism, history proves that proposition to be untrue. I mean neither praise nor blame of Whig or Tory, in adverting to matters which passed long before the political existence of the present generation; but historically speaking, I must say, that freedom of commerce has in former times been the doctrine rather of Tories than of Whigs. If I look back, for instance, to the transactions between this country and France, the only commercial treaty which I can find, beside that which was signed by me and my Right Honourable friend but the other day, since the peace of Utrecht, is the convention of 1786. With respect to the treaty, the House need not be afraid that I am now going to discuss the principles of the treaty of Utrecht. But by whom was the convention of 1786 proposed and sup-

* See Lord Stanley's Speech, June 4, 1841.

ported?—By Mr. Pitt. By whom was it opposed?—By Mr. Fox. I will not go into the arguments which might be used on either side; I enter not into the question who was right or wrong. I mention the circumstance only to show how easily facts are perverted for particular purposes of vituperation. It is an old adage, that when a man wishes to beat a dog, he has no difficulty in finding a stick: but the stick in the present instance has been unfortunately chosen.”

The choice of the stick has been equally unfortunate on the present occasion. The charge of plagiarism can with as little justice be made either against Sir Robert Peel or the leading members of his Administration. In proof of this it is scarcely necessary to do more than mention that the Duke of Wellington, Lord Ripon, Lord Lyndhurst, and Mr. Goulburn were in office under Lord Liverpool when the attack thus refuted by Mr. Canning was made on his Government in 1826. So was Sir Robert Peel; and of the injustice of the charge, as applied to him, no better evidence can be adduced than that of Lord Melbourne and Mr. Disraeli.

In the debate on the tariff in 1842, Mr. Disraeli is reported in Hansard to have spoken as follows :*

“ With reference to the accusation made on the other side of the House, that the Right Honourable Bart. at the head of the Government had repudiated principles when in opposition which he had adopted when in office,—that charge had been made without due examination of the facts of the case. He did not think that the Honourable Gentlemen opposite had succeeded in making out their claim to being peculiarly the originators of the principles of Free Trade; and as it was of great importance that the House should have as correct a knowledge as possible as to the pedigree of those particular dogmas, *that gentlemen opposite should not continue to consider that the country was indebted to*

* Hansard, 3rd Series, vol. lxiii. p. 390.

themselves for the doctrines of Free Trade, or gentlemen on his own side imagine that those doctrines were of such recent and modern invention as was generally supposed, he might be allowed to remind the House that it was Mr. Pitt who first promulgated them in 1787."

Mr. Disraeli then goes on to show how, on that occasion, Fox, Burke, Sheridan, and the late Lord Grey took a decided part against Mr. Pitt, whose opinions on commerce were so far in advance of the age, that not even one member of his own Government in the House of Lords was willing or competent to become their advocate; and concludes by saying—

"The principles of Free Trade were developed—and not by Whigs—fifty years ago; and how was it that the Whig party now came forward and contended that they were the originators of these opinions? But what was the conduct of the Pitt party after the peace? Was the party which originally brought Free Trade principles into notice at that period false to those principles? If that question were fairly examined, it would be found that exactly the reverse was the case, and that on the very first possible occasion *the Administration of Lord Liverpool showed itself in advance of the age upon the question of a greater freedom of trade.* Before Mr. Huskisson exercised his great and beneficial influence on the commercial legislation of this country, Mr. Wallace and Mr. Robinson had carried a series of measures founded on the true principles of commerce, and Mr. Huskisson only prosecuted their system; and in what the Right Honourable Bart. now proposed, it was manifest that he was doing neither more nor less than carrying into effect principles which originated with Mr. Pitt. The conduct pursued by the Right Honourable Bart. was in exact harmony, in perfect consistency, with the principles in reference to Free Trade laid down by Mr. Pitt, and his *reason for saying thus much, was to refute the accusations which had been brought against the present Government, that in order to get into, and being in, to keep office, they had changed their opinions on these subjects."*

Still more emphatic, and, if possible, still more im-

partial, is the declaration of Lord Melbourne, who, in speaking of Sir Robert Peel's commercial policy at the dinner of the Fishmongers' Company in August, 1845, said,

"We all know that these very measures have been productive, in both Houses of Parliament, of much difference of opinion; and they have been the cause of much bitter feeling, not to say malignant invective, being levelled against the Right Honourable Baronet at the head of Her Majesty's Government, upon the notion of some supposed inconsistency of these measures with his former opinions and conduct. Placed as I have been by circumstances in the position of an antagonist and competitor to that Right Honourable Baronet, it is natural I should look into and examine his conduct, not with hostile jealousy, or any hostile feeling, but with care and anxiety. It is natural that I should be anxious to learn what his conduct has been, what have been his measures, and what have been the principles upon which they have been founded, and what the language in which he has argued and enforced these principles. I have made such inquiry and examination, and I think myself bound to state as the result of it, that I know nothing in the antecedent conduct of the Right Honourable Baronet, which should, in point of consistency, preclude him from bringing forward either the measures which he has brought forward, or any other measures in the same direction which he may convince his understanding or persuade his conscience would be both expedient and conducive to the benefit and advantage of his country. Thus much I have thought it my duty to say. I had intended to have said it in Parliament, but I have never been able to find an opportunity of doing so."

This declaration of opinion was highly creditable to Lord Melbourne, and it is not surprising he should have made it. Whatever faults he may have had as a Minister, it never could with justice be said that to them he added that of dealing unfairly with the character of his political opponents. He must have

known that his Administration had lost the confidence of Parliament and of the country long before the Session of 1841 ; that he had on that account resigned office in 1839, the very year in which he made the celebrated declaration, that to repeal the Corn Laws would be " the wildest and maddest scheme that ever entered into the mind of man ;" he must have remembered that in January, 1840, he had narrowly escaped defeat upon a motion of want of confidence, based upon grounds altogether distinct from any question affecting the Corn Laws, for at that time his Cabinet had proposed no alteration of those laws ; and he knew that the motion of want of confidence made in 1841 was founded upon the incapacity of his Government, its inability to carry its measures, the defalcation it had brought about in the revenue, and the unsatisfactory state of its relations with foreign powers. But above all, he knew that opposition to the removal of commercial restrictions was no part of the political creed of those who were then opposed to him.

It seems now to be almost forgotten that Lord Melbourne held office under Mr. Canning in 1827, along with Lord Lyndhurst and Lord Ripon ; and that he also held office under the Duke of Wellington, in 1828, with Sir Robert Peel, Mr. Goulburn, and Lord Aberdeen. He had thus the best possible opportunities of knowing the opinion of his leading opponents in 1841, on the subject of commercial freedom. He had witnessed the part taken by many of them, and in particular by Sir Robert Peel, in supporting Mr. Huskisson ; and he knew that that was no lukewarm part. So early as the year 1824, when the application of the principles of Free Trade was by no means popular, but, on the contrary, viewed with the utmost

dread even by the manufacturing interests of the country; and when the present Lord Denman, Mr. Ellice, Mr. Baring, now Lord Ashburton, and other leading Whigs, although approving of the theory of Free Trade, were throwing decided obstacles in the way of its practical application, Mr. Canning and Mr. Peel are found urging upon the House of Commons the necessity of disregarding the partial and interested opposition, and of gradually enforcing those principles of trade, the theory of which they professed to approve of. On the 5th of March, 1824, Sir Robert Peel is reported to have concluded a speech on a debate raised by Mr. Baring on the subject of the admission of French silks, with the following pointed observations:—

“The Honourable Gentleman has asked who was to be considered the sponsor of this plan? No individual certainly, but those general principles which the Honourable Gentleman had himself invariably advocated. They were the sponsors,—and higher authority than any advice from parties interested in the silk manufacture. *After declaiming so often and so long in favour of the principles of Free Trade, let the House consider in what a light it would stand before Europe, if it did not attempt, instead of aiming at temporary popularity, to establish sound principles of commercial policy. How would those principles be prejudiced, if, knowing them to be irrefragable, Parliament, not having the courage to encounter difficulties, were to yield to the fears of the timid or the representations of the interested.*”*

From that period down to his removal from office in 1830, Sir Robert Peel was a party to every measure carried through Parliament to effect the removal of commercial restrictions. It is now well known that he, as Secretary of State for the Home Department,

* See Hansard, New Series, vol. x. p. 740.

was intrusted with the preparation of the King's Speech in 1825. He made it his boast that he had been so, and also that he cordially approved of all Mr. Huskisson's Free Trade measures, both before and after the dissolution in 1841. In the speech of 1825 Parliament was congratulated on the advantages that had been derived "from the relief recently given to commerce by the removal of inconvenient restrictions;" and is recommended "to persevere in the removal of similar restrictions." That recommendation was acted upon. The relief alluded to was that afforded by the Silk Trade measures of Mr. Huskisson, passed in 1824; and which were followed up accordingly in 1825, by other similar changes in our commercial system. It was in that session of Parliament that Mr. Huskisson made his two very remarkable speeches on foreign and colonial commercial policy, announcing a general revision of the revenue laws. These changes met with some opposition at the time; but in 1826 and 1827 they were made the groundwork of the most unmeasured vituperation and abuse of Mr. Huskisson and all who were associated with him in their introduction. The supporters of "Fettered Trade"—as Mr. Huskisson described the opponents of his policy—denounced him in language even more violent than that now applied by the Protectionists to Sir Robert Peel. The debate in 1826, on Mr. Ellice's motion relative to the effects of the Free Trade system on the silk manufacture, was seized upon as a fit opportunity for a general attack on the new commercial regulations and their authors. That attack called forth Mr. Canning's refutation of the charge that the Government were borrowing the principles of the Whigs; and also a brilliant defence of himself, his colleagues, and Mr.

Huskisson in particular, from "the vulgar topics of ribald invective" with which they had been assailed by a sect "who think that all advances towards improvement are retrogradations towards Jacobinism; and that under no possible circumstances can an honest man endeavour to keep his country upon a line with the progress of political knowledge, and to adapt its course to the varying circumstances of the world," without branding it as an "indication of mischievous intentions—as evidence of a design to sap the foundations of the greatness of his country."*

The expressions which led to this defence exceeded, if possible, anything applied to the late Government and their supporters. In opposing the proposed inquiry, Mr. Huskisson "was represented as invariably indifferent to the sufferings of those on whose behalf it was called forth," and likened to "a hard-hearted metaphysician, exceeding the devil in point of malignity;" and in the following year he found it necessary to allude, in his speech on the commercial and shipping interests, to charges exactly similar in kind and in degree to those now repeated, at an interval of twenty years, against the very men who were conjoined with him in 1826. He was again, in May, 1827, run down as a "wild theorist;" charged with "palming upon the house and the country measures of great public importance, under false pretences;"† with being "guilty of gross political fraud; with attempting to support his exaggerated statements, "and to deceive the public by returns purposely prepared to lead to false conclusions."‡

* *Vide* Huskisson's Speeches, vol. ii. p. 527.

† *Ibid.*, vol. iii. p. 80.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

In answer to these attacks, Mr. Huskisson adopted pretty much the same course as that followed last year by Sir R. Peel. He would not condescend "to bandy about personalities with his opponents in the House of Commons;" and with reference to the "calumnies that were heaped" upon him personally out of doors, he indignantly replied,

"Let not the hireling authors of those calumnies suppose that I am going to retort upon them the low, vulgar abuse which they have attempted to cast upon me. The only punishment which they shall receive at my hands is, to show them that their venom is fallen innocuous upon me; that I am not infected by it; and that, however unjustly attacked, I feel too much respect for this House—I might add, too much self-respect—to resort to such base engines in my defence."*

The venom has, indeed, fallen innocuous upon him. At the distance of twenty years, the man who was the subject of those attacks is now almost universally admitted to have been one of the ablest and most conscientious practical statesmen that ever held office in this country. But although the venom has thus fallen innocuous upon him, and the calumnies and their authors are well nigh forgotten, the spirit that dictated the attacks survives. The sect so graphically described by Mr. Canning is not without its representatives in the present day, who have shown themselves no unworthy successors of the "Fettered Trade" party of 1826. That the representatives of that party should have indulged in the most violent abuse of a series of commercial measures based upon the same principles as those which called forth the

* *Vide* Huskisson's Speeches, vol. iii. p. 84.

calumnies of 1826, is not to be wondered at; but it is most surprising that to charges similar to those made against Mr. Huskisson and his colleagues should be added that of inconsistency, of deserting the principles of a lifetime, and borrowing those of the Whigs; and that this should be reiterated day after day, and almost without contradiction, against the Duke of Wellington, Lord Ripon, Lord Lyndhurst, Sir Robert Peel, and Mr. Goulburn, some of whom sat in the same Cabinet with Mr. Huskisson in 1826, and all of whom were in office at the time, simply because, from 1841 to 1846, they have been carrying into more full operation those principles of commercial policy, which they had been parties to the application of during Lord Liverpool's Administration.

If any more conclusive evidence were required of the liberal views entertained by Sir Robert Peel at that period on the subject of commerce, and of his being more justly entitled than any other living statesman to follow up a Free Trade policy, it is to be found in the repeated declarations of Mr. Huskisson himself. When taunted with inconsistency, in 1828, for joining the Duke of Wellington's Administration, he defended himself mainly on the ground of the similarity of opinion between Sir Robert Peel and himself on the subject of commercial freedom; and when the attempt was made to single him out, with one or two of his immediate friends, and to run them down as supporters of an unsound system of policy, he quoted the Duke of Wellington's declaration, that he held himself responsible for the measures introduced by Mr. Huskisson under Lord Liverpool's Government, and added,—

“ Having taken the liberty to read these words, so expressive of the noble Duke's sentiments, I would wish those

who are ever mischievously endeavouring to identify him with their own contracted views and prejudices, to bear them in their recollection, and to mitigate somewhat of that blundering zeal, under the impulse of which, in their anxiety to asperse the character of Mr. Canning, they do not perceive that they are calling in question the sincerity and good faith of the noble Duke."*

With what truth might not these words be applied to those who are now endeavouring to separate Sir Robert Peel from the same noble Duke. In their determination to run down, and if possible irretrievably damage, the character of the one, they seem wilfully blind to the fact that in every imputation of insincerity, in every charge of inconsistency, made against the one, they are directly calling in question the honesty and good faith of the other.

On the occasion of Mr. Huskisson's retirement from office in 1828, he made another and a similar declaration of strict and continued unison of opinion and of principles between himself and Sir Robert Peel, on all questions of foreign and commercial policy; and still later, in April, 1829, he repeated the same sentiments after he had ceased to be politically connected with the Duke of Wellington. He stated, in the outset of his speech on the silk trade, in reply to Mr. Sadler, the recently elected champion of the "Fettered Trade" party, that he had felt it his duty to attend in the House to support the Government in any further alterations it might be necessary to make, in order to confirm and perfect the measures of 1824 and 1825, the Ministry having declared their intention to persevere with those measures.†

* Huskisson's Speeches, vol. iii. p. 216.

† *Ibid.*, vol. iii. p. 411, 421.

The Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel having thus prior to the year 1830 been parties to the introduction of a liberal system of foreign trade, and cordial supporters of all Mr. Huskisson's Free Trade measures, it may be asked, what was Lord John Russell about during all this time, who is now represented as an old, steady, consistent Free-trader, while Sir Robert Peel is reproached as a renegade and deserter of his former principles, and a convert to those of the Whigs? During the latter part of the above period, Lord John may be found giving an occasional vote, or even now and then saying a few words, in favour of the measures of the Government; but during the earlier period he appears to have been otherwise employed. He had not very long before (*viz.*, in 1819) delivered his speech in defence of the British Constitution, and of those nomination boroughs which in 1830 he helped to destroy. And while Mr. Canning, Mr. Huskisson, and Sir Robert Peel were urging on an at first rather reluctant House of Commons the necessity of acting up to their Free Trade principles, and even of adopting a modification of the Corn Law of 1815, Lord John is buckling on his armour as an agriculturist, and denouncing the ministers, and among them Sir Robert Peel, as

“About to give up the question of trade in corn” to a party amongst us, “however distinguished in what is called the science of political economy, who wish to substitute the corn of Poland and Russia for our own. Their principle is, that you ought always to buy where you can buy cheapest. They repeat with emphasis that the nation pays a tax of 2,500,000*l.* yearly to the growers of corn. They count as nothing the value to the country of a hardy race of farmers and labourers. They care not for the difference between an agricultural and a manufacturing population in all that

concerns morals, order, national strength, and national tranquillity. Wealth is the only object of their speculation; nor do they much consider the two or three millions of people who may be reduced to utter beggary in the course of their operations. This they call diverting capital into another channel. Their reasonings lie so much in abstract terms, their speculations deal so much by the gross, that they have the same insensibility about the sufferings of a people that a general has respecting the loss of men wearied by his operations."*

Such being the relative position of these statesmen prior to 1830, there can be no doubt that the claims of Sir Robert Peel to be the follower up of a Free Trade policy were at that time far superior to those of Lord John Russell: and unless it can be shown that at some future period Sir Robert Peel repudiated the principles he had enforced as the colleague of Mr. Huskisson, there can be as little doubt that he was quite free, and even bound in consistency to act upon them in 1841, when his restoration to power gave him the opportunity of doing so with advantage to the commerce of the country.

A glance at the parliamentary history of the ten years during which the Whigs were in office will show that neither Sir Robert Peel nor any one of his former colleagues ever did repudiate those principles—that they were known to entertain them when he was selected as the leader of the Conservative opposition—that there could therefore be no dereliction of principle in bringing about, as the varying circumstances of the age required, a more extensive application of

* Huntingdon Letter, 1822. All this indignation, which would be worthy of the British Lion of the present day, was founded on the circumstance that certain Resolutions had been or were to be proposed by Mr. Huskisson with a view to modify the Corn Law of 1815.

the same system of policy, which had been acted upon to a great extent, and amid much vituperation and abuse, by Lord Liverpool's Government nearly 'twenty years before.

Driven from power by a coalition of Whigs and ultra Tories, very similar to that which effected their removal in 1846, the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel were deprived of the opportunity of following up and perfecting in 1830 the commercial measures then in operation, and of carrying out the system of practical and strictly economical reform upon which they had acted from the time they were first intrusted with the administration of affairs. During the Government of Earl Grey however, no measure of practical reform met with any opposition from either the Duke or Sir Robert Peel. Organic changes in the Constitution of the country they did oppose; but every measure tending to lessen monopolies—the opening of the China trade, for instance—met with their cordial support.

Towards the summer of 1834, however, the then Opposition were forced to adopt a different course; and by the end of that year the small band of men professing Conservative principles who had been returned to the first Reformed Parliament, and who consisted partly of ultra Tories and partly of politicians of the Pitt and Canning school, received a sudden and powerful reinforcement. And here the important question occurs, What led to this reinforcement? Was it any attempt on the part of the Whigs to remove commercial restrictions? No such attempt had been made. Was it any proposal to alter the Corn Laws? Earl Grey and Lord Melbourne were known to be decided supporters of the then existing

Corn Laws ; and Lord Althorp, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, had that very year negatived Mr. Hume's proposition for a fixed duty on corn. It was nothing connected with Corn Laws or commercial restrictions, therefore, which led to the breaking up of the Grey Administration, and the reinforcement of the Conservatives at the general election in 1834. But it was the 147th clause of the Irish Tithe Bill. That clause contained the germ of the Appropriation Clause. It was looked upon as a direct attack upon the property of the Church ; and on that account Lord Stanley, Sir James Graham, Lord Ripon, and the Duke of Richmond detached themselves from the Whigs. It was the Lichfield House compact between Mr. O'Connell and the Whigs to turn out Sir Robert Peel, and the fruit of that compact, Lord John Russell's Appropriation Clause and his subsequent return to power, that led to Lord Stanley and Sir James Graham cordially joining Sir Robert Peel. And it was the indifference, or rather the favour, with which Lord John Russell and Lord Melbourne viewed the attacks made by many of their supporters on the House of Peers, for refusing to accede to the Appropriation Clause and other obnoxious Whig measures, with their appointment to office of men who were in favour of Vote by Ballot and of the expulsion of the Bishops from the House of Lords, and not averse in other respects to reforming that body, which led to the complete union of Lord Stanley, Sir Robert Peel, Sir James Graham, and their respective followers, in 1836, 1837, and 1838, in the one House of Parliament : and of the Duke of Wellington, the Duke of Richmond, the Earl of Ripon, and Lord Lyndhurst, and their followers, in the other. By the beginning of

1838 the Conservative party was firmly organized, with Sir Robert Peel at their head ; and neither then nor for several years afterwards had the Whig Government given their sanction to any measure for altering the Corn Laws, or for the removal otherwise of commercial restrictions. On the contrary, in the year 1839, Lord Melbourne, the head of that Government, made his celebrated declaration in support of those Corn Laws ; and in 1840 the Government opposed a man Mr. Ewart's motion for an equalization of the sugar duties, which they afterwards adopted as their own in the spring of 1841.

It is plain, therefore, that a rigid adherence to the Corn Law of 1828 and to the commercial regulations in existence when the Conservative party was organized, did not form any part of its creed, still less the basis of its policy. It was not any attempt to alter those laws that led to its formation. The Conservative party was formed to defend the Protestant Church from spoliation, and to resist organic changes in the Constitution of the country ; and it reckoned among its leading members many who were decided friends to all practical and economical reforms, and favourable to the utmost possible relaxation of commercial restrictions that was consistent with the safety of the revenue. Sir Robert Peel, the Free Trade coadjutor of Mr. Huskisson, was selected as the Conservative leader in the one House, and the Duke of Wellington, Lord Lyndhurst, and the Earl of Ripon, also colleagues and supporters of Mr. Huskisson, led this party in the other.

It cannot be pretended that either Sir Robert Peel or the Duke of Wellington, when thus selected as the leaders of the Opposition, had made any retraction

of the sentiments formerly entertained by them on commercial policy and economical reform. They were, on the contrary, always distrusted on these points by a certain small section of the Conservatives. Their views were considered too liberal. The address issued to the electors of Tamworth by Sir Robert Peel, on his return from Rome in 1834, was distasteful to many ultra Tories on the one hand, and held to be a sort of electioneering hoax by many Radicals on the other. But the opinions expressed in that address were adhered to. From that period the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel, while they resisted "the alienation of Church property in any part of the United Kingdom from strictly ecclesiastical purposes,"* showed by their conduct, both in office and in opposition, that the liberal course of policy announced on their taking office in 1834 would be followed up. So far from there having been any repudiation of the opinions entertained by them on those subjects on which they are now said to have changed their creeds, viz. currency, direct taxation, and commercial freedom, their conduct with reference to them when formerly in power was referred to as conclusive proof that they were not behind, but rather before the spirit of the age, and that no necessary practical reform would be met by any opposition on their part. And, disguise it as their opponents may, there can be no doubt that the belief that such were the opinions of the Duke of Wellington, Sir Robert Peel, and their immediate supporters, attracted many to the Conservative ranks, who, but for that belief, never would have joined them.

* *Vide* 'Letter to the Electors of Tamworth,' published by Roake and Varty, p. 12.

The speech delivered by Sir Robert Peel at the dinner given to him in Glasgow, in January, 1837, one of the most important political demonstrations on record, may fairly be referred to as an exposition of the principles upon which the Conservative party were then held to be organized. No candid man, reading the report of the proceedings on that occasion, can fail to come to the conclusion that it was not any apprehension of the Whig ministry adopting a Free Trade or anti-Corn-Law policy that led to that vast assemblage. The Corn Laws were not even made the subject-matter of a toast. The 3500 men who met there, met to record their determination, as Sir Robert Peel expressed it, "To support the national establishments which connected Protestantism with the State in the three countries;" and "To support in its full integrity the authority of the House of Lords;" which establishments, and which authority, were then both endangered, owing to the time-serving conduct of the Whigs. And one main ground on which the duty of maintaining the integrity and independence of the House of Lords was enforced upon the meeting was, the readiness with which that House had acceded to all measures of practical reform, and among these to the changes which had taken place in the commercial policy of the country before the passing of the Reform Bill.

But a still more distinct definition of Conservative principles will be found in the speech of Sir Robert Peel at the dinner given to him in May, 1838, by 313 members of the House of Commons, "representing," as stated in the 'Times' of that period, "four-fifths of the property, intelligence, and public virtue to be found among the Commons of the United Kingdom,

bringing together the remotest extremities of the realm, to unite them in principle and purpose as one man for the maintenance of our national institutions, and of a determined war upon a band of mercenary traitors who have assaulted them—such a spectacle as such a meeting exhibits was never seen before.”* Sir Robert Peel's health was proposed by the present Duke of Buckingham, who, in allusion to that statesman's conduct when formerly in office, and to his expected return to power ere long, spoke of “the liberal, statesmanlike measures he had prepared as Minister of the late King;” and boasted that these “would be carried into effect, and render him *one of the most popular*, as he *was the most honest and best of ministers* that ever ruled this country.” In returning thanks, Sir Robert Peel concluded his speech with the following pertinent remarks:—

“If asked What do you mean by Conservative principles?—as we are sometimes taunted with giving a vague and unsatisfactory description of them, I would in conclusion briefly state the meaning I attach to them. By Conservative principles, then, I mean, and I believe you mean, the maintenance of the prerogative of the Monarch, the maintenance of the just powers and attributes of Queen, Lords, and Commons of the country, and the determination to resist every encroachment which can curtail the just rights and settled privileges of one or other of those three branches of the Constitution. By Conservative principles we mean, that co-existent with the equality of civil rights and privileges, there shall be an Established Religion, paid and encouraged by the State, and that the Established Religion shall maintain the doctrines of the Protestant Reformed Faith. By Conservative principles we mean, a steady resistance to every project for the alienation of Church property from

* Vide ‘Times’ of May 14th, 1838.

strictly spiritual purposes. We do not mean to raise an unnecessary cry to serve a political end, that the Church is in danger; but we do put it to every reasonable man to say whether those proposals do not endanger the Church, which, if carried into effect, would, in Ireland, alienate from the Establishment a certain proportion of her property in violation of binding compacts and the most solemn assurances, and devote it to the purposes of education, expressly excluding instruction in the main principles and precepts of the Protestant Religion. We do put it to every reasonable man to say whether, although their property be improved, if concurrently the Bishops in England should be made stipendiaries of the State, the Church could be free from danger, its own revenues being applied to relieve property from a burden to which it has been immemorially subject.

* * * * * We do ask, if those two measures were passed, whether they would not greatly endanger the maintenance of the Establishment in both countries? By Conservative principles we mean, the rescuing from threatened danger our Protestant Establishments. Nay, more, we mean the infliction, if we can, of 'a heavy blow and a great discouragement' upon those principles which are antagonist to the establishment of the Protestant Faith in these realms. By Conservative principles we mean, the maintenance of our settled institutions in Church and State; and we mean also the preservation and defence of that combination of law, of institutions, of usages, of habits and manners, which have contributed to mould and form the character of Englishmen, and which have enabled this country, in the contentions and fearful rivalry of war, to extort the admiration of her enemies, and in the equally glorious career of peaceful industry, of commercial enterprise, of mechanical skill, of social improvement, have endeared the name of England and of Englishmen in every country of the world, to those who seek for the establishment of liberty without licence, and look to the maintenance of that pure form of religion which is at once the consolation of the virtuous man and the best guarantee which human institutions can afford to civil and religious liberty."

This exposition of the meaning of Conservative

principles was received with acclamation at the time ; and, coupled with what took place in Glasgow the year before, proves beyond all question that the Conservative opposition was organized upon grounds altogether unconnected with the maintenance of commercial restrictions.* In 1839, the year in which Lord Melbourne declared that to repeal the Corn Laws would be madness, so vigorous was the opposition to his Government on the Bill to annihilate the Constitution of Jamaica, that the Ministry resigned. Restored to power by the Bedchamber plot, they were subjected to the withering attacks of Lord Lyndhurst and Lord Brougham at the close of the Session of 1839. In the speech of Lord Lyndhurst, which was circulated in thousands through the country, the conduct of the Government was passed in review with reference to all those measures by means of which they had rendered themselves deserving of public reprobation, as incapable "of conducting the affairs of this mighty empire in a manner suitable to its wants and necessities." But the Corn Laws were not alluded to by Lord Lyndhurst. No alteration of those laws had up to that time been proposed : and yet such was the effect produced by that speech out of doors, that from 1839 the days of the ministry were considered doomed ; and in January, 1840, a

* The circumstance that Sir R. Peel and most of the members of his administration supported the Maynooth grant, cannot be said by their present opponents to amount to any departure from the above exposition. The education of the Roman Catholic clergy was a favourite scheme of Mr. Pitt ; and Sir R. Peel, when in opposition, voted for the continuance of the grant, while many of his habitual supporters opposed it. The addition made to it in 1845 was, as has been shown, cordially approved of by many who are still lauded as true to Conservative principles ; and that by Protectionist journals, which advocated the Maynooth grant in 1845 as calculated to lead to the Reformation of Ireland.

motion was made to remove them from power. It was lost by a very narrow majority. But from that date it was plain that on the very first appeal to the electors the Conservative Opposition would change places with the Government and their supporters, and that Sir Robert Peel would be Minister of England.

Had this happened in 1840, could it for a moment have been maintained that he and his colleagues would have been precluded, on the score of consistency, from following up and perfecting, as the circumstances of the country required it, that system of commercial policy to which they had been parties twenty years before? or that they were pledged to the then existing Corn Laws, and to oppose any modification of these laws, rendered necessary in their opinion "to keep the country on a line with the progress of political knowledge, and to adapt its course to the varying circumstances of the world?" It is scarcely pretended, even by the bitterest opponents of Sir Robert Peel, that in 1840 there was anything in their antecedent conduct which could have precluded the members of the Peel Ministry, any more than Lord John Russell and his adherents, "from bringing forward," to use Lord Melbourne's words of 1845, "either the measures which they did bring forward, or any other measures in the same direction, which they might convince their understanding or persuade their consciences would be both expedient and conducive to the benefit of the country."

And if such was the case in 1840, if Sir Robert Peel and his colleagues would have been at liberty had he remained in power in 1835, or formed a Government in 1839, to introduce any measures of commercial freedom which might appear to them

necessary to follow out Mr. Huskisson's plans, and to adapt the commerce of the country to the progress of political events, it does seem somewhat absurd to charge them with treachery and dishonesty simply because at a period when the circumstances of the country imperatively required, and that by universal admission, some change in our commercial regulations, they considered it their duty to recommend a very extensive application of the principles of Free Trade.

But it is said—and here, in one point of view, lies the substance of the charge—that things had very much changed in 1841. That even granting Sir Robert Peel and those of his colleagues who had been associated with him prior to 1830, to have been at liberty in 1840 to introduce great commercial and financial reforms, such a course was no longer open to them in 1841. In short, that Lord Melbourne's administration having been defeated upon a question of Free Trade, and the general election having been allowed to proceed upon the understanding that Sir Robert Peel and his leading political supporters were decidedly opposed to the removal of commercial restrictions, and to any alteration of the Corn Laws then in operation, all Conservatives were from that time precluded from following out a Free Trade policy.

Now the answer to this objection is a simple denial of the existence of any such understanding. And in proof of this it may seem almost superfluous to do more than refer to the speeches of Lord Melbourne and Mr. Disraeli, quoted in the preceding pages. It is not easy to figure two more impartial witnesses. The opinions of an ultra-Protectionist on the one hand, and on the other of the Minister whom Sir

Robert Peel was instrumental in removing from power, should be conclusive, at least on the general question of Free Trade, with every one not blinded by prejudice and determined to shut his eyes to the truth. But it is of importance to show that these opinions are fully borne out by what took place in 1841.

It cannot be disputed that the budget of 1841 was what led to the defeat and final overthrow of Lord Melbourne's Administration : but it was by no means the cause of that defeat. The attempt of an incapable and powerless Government, through whose mismanagement every interest in the country had been paralyzed, thus to tamper with so delicate a matter as the commercial policy of a great commercial country, did unquestionably fill the cup of public indignation to overflowing : but that cup had been filled to the brim long before the budget of 1841. By the beginning of that year the Administration was in a most pitiable position. From the date of their return to office by means of the Bedchamber plot of 1839, they were totally powerless. They escaped defeat on a motion of want of confidence in January, 1840, by the small majority of ten. In the course of that same Session of Parliament they were night after night left in minorities on questions of vital importance ; but they still clung to office with unexampled tenacity. By the beginning of 1841 they had reduced the finances of the country to a very deplorable condition, and they knew full well that they had lost the confidence, if not of Parliament, at all events of the overwhelming majority of the people. It was in these circumstances when, as Lord Stanley said,* they saw "not county

* *Vide* Lord Stanley's Speech, May 12, 1841.

by county, but burgh by burgh, their hold upon the country gradually slipping away from them; when the common consent of the country proclaimed that they could no longer hold the reins of office, as they had long ceased to hold the reins of power; that they produced their crude and ill-digested scheme involving the most extensive financial changes: . . . “and this with the full conviction that it was impossible they would be able to carry the project into effect.” And it was rejected, not so much on account of its own demerits, as because nobody had confidence in the capacity of the Ministry to devise and carry into execution any beneficial proposal. It was a bad measure, moreover; partial in its application, pressing invidiously and injuriously on particular interests, and with no prospect of accomplishing the professed object of its authors, viz., that of bettering the finances of the country. Ministers had been in office since 1835. For the first few years they had the power to carry their measures at least through the House of Commons. During that period the trade and commerce of the country were by no means in a flourishing condition, and yet when Ministers had some degree of power, and possessed some small portion of the public confidence, they made no attempt to free commerce from restrictions, and thereby relieve trade of its embarrassments, and at the same time better the revenue. In 1840 they had opposed Mr. Ewart's motion for an equalization of sugar duties, which they themselves adopted as the basis of their budget in 1841. The sugar duties were the only part of that budget which went through the ordeal of Parliamentary discussion; and considering what had occurred the year before, it is not surprising that on them the

Government should have been defeated. Still they adhered to office; and as it was now evident that nothing but a direct vote of want of confidence could deliver the country from their misrule, that vote was proposed and carried; not upon the merits of their measures, not in condemnation of the principles of Free Trade, but in condemnation of a Ministry which, since 1839, had been "unable to carry any measure which they deemed essential to the public welfare;" and because their continuance in office was in these circumstances "at variance with the spirit of the Constitution."*

At the general election which followed, the decision of the House of Commons was stamped with public approval. The majority of one, by which Ministers were defeated on the 4th of June, was, by the 27th of August, swelled to a majority of ninety-one. But, whatever may have been the case with individuals, and in particular agricultural constituencies, this general result was not a verdict as to the application of Free Trade principles, and in favour of restrictions upon commerce. The matter in dispute was not put, and, what is of more importance, was not allowed to be put upon that issue at the general election, either by Lord Stanley or Sir Robert Peel. All leading statesmen were then at one as to a certain amount of protection being necessary. Lord John Russell, in the matter of corn, was for an 8s. duty; Sir Robert Peel, for a modification of the existing sliding scale; and they were all for some protection, for this plain reason—that the circumstances of the country did not at that time require and would not have admitted of any very great

* *Vide* resolution moved by Sir R. Peel on May 27th, 1841.

modification of the existing Corn duties; nor were the revenue and finances of the country in a condition to bear any general relaxation of commercial restrictions. All, therefore, with very few exceptions, were for protection. The Whig Government fancied they would get revenue as well as protection by their proposal. Still, they were for protection. And when they and certain of their supporters endeavoured to claim a monopoly of Free Trade, and to raise a Free Trade cry with a view to the general election, they were indignantly checked, both by Lord Stanley, who ridiculed the Whig budget in so far as it professed to be based upon Free Trade; and by Sir Robert Peel, who, before and after the dissolution, entered his solemn protest against its being supposed, that because he voted against the Whig budget, he was therefore opposed to, or to be precluded from carrying into operation the removal of commercial restrictions, or even a modification of the existing Corn Laws.

In the debate upon the sugar duties on the 12th May, 1841, Lord Stanley, in answer to the attempt made by some of the Ministerial party to puff themselves off as champions of Free Trade, and after showing that both Lord John Russell and Lord Melbourne introduced their measure as one of protection, said—

“I ask the Noble Lord opposite and the members of her Majesty’s Government, how they can put themselves forward to the country as advocates of Free Trade, and appeal to the country for support as though they had proposed a Free Trade in corn, and in timber, and in sugar? As to corn, the Noble Lord tells us that he proposes a protecting duty of 8s. a quarter; and though we may question whether that is an adequate protection, yet the Noble Lord concurs with us in principle by distinctly announcing his proposed duty as a protecting duty (hear, hear). Then the Noble Lord has

announced himself as a free-trader in timber. But what is he about to do? Not only does he keep up the duty between Baltic and Canadian timber (which discriminating duty may be too high or too low), but the Noble Lord as a free-trader, goes one step further, and on an article of general consumption, and which, by the laws of Free Trade, ought to be specially exempted, the Noble Lord imposes an additional duty of 100 per cent."

Then, as to the sugar duties, Lord Stanley goes on to ask—

"What is this proposition which the free-traders are required to laud so highly and for which the consumer is to be so grateful? Why, merely this: the Noble Lord proposes to relieve the distresses of the people by a reduction of the discriminating duty to the extent of about six-tenths of a farthing in the pound, while he not only leaves on a discriminating duty still, but also leaves untouched the whole of the duty levied alike on British and Foreign sugar for the purposes of revenue, amounting to a tax, upon an article of universal consumption, of about 100 per cent. Again I say the Noble Lord may be right; again I say the necessities of the revenue may compel him to take that course; but when he talks about upholding the principles of Free Trade, which he is to carry out with a simplicity and a purity that are to be the wonder of all succeeding times, and an example to all future Governments, I say that the continuance by him of such heavy import duties on articles of such general consumption, and of such prime necessity, is in utter contradiction to his pretensions, and must deprive him of that character of the champion of Free Trade which he and others for him have been so anxious to assume."

The speech of Lord Stanley effectually extinguished Lord John Russell's claims to the championship of Free Trade. It was followed up on the 18th of May in a similar strain by Sir Robert Peel, who, at the same time, avowed himself the cordial supporter of all Mr. Huskisson's measures:—

“And now, forsooth (said the Right Honourable Bart.), we are to be told that Mr. Huskisson met with nothing but obstruction from his own party, and that he was wafted over all his difficulties on the overflowing wave of Whig enthusiasm. The Noble Lord seems to claim an exclusive inheritance of the principles of Mr. Huskisson—nay, he makes the awful announcement, that if he and his colleagues are driven out of office, they will pack up the principles of Free Trade and carry them off with them. ‘Don’t rob us of our property,’ says the Noble Lord; but at last the generosity of his nature prevails, and he promises that if he is properly applied to by his successors, he will not withhold a contribution from the stock of liberal policy. Why, what right has the Noble Lord to claim this exclusive dominion over the principles of Mr. Huskisson? When did we hear a word of them until the pressure of the present moment? Was there ever any public man who pronounced so positive a condemnation of the principles of Free Trade as the present Prime Minister of this country? and did one of you dissent from that declaration? When Lord Melbourne said that it would be absolute insanity to deprive the agriculture of this country of protection—and when he held language from which it must be reasonably inferred that he thought it impossible in the complicated relations of society in this country to apply the pure principles of Free Trade to the trade in corn, or almost anything else, when he gave this plain indication of his sentiments as the head of the Government—did one man of you rise in this House to express his opinion as to those sentiments? Was the budget of last year brought forward on the principles which are now advocated? Was the 5 per cent. additional on Customs and Excise a specimen of your comprehensive financial views? When the President of the Board of Trade, in the simplicity of his heart, said there could be no great harm in putting 5 per cent. additional on tobacco, since the present amount of duty was 1200 per cent. on the prime cost of the article, had he then become a convert to the principles of Mr. Huskisson?”

While Sir Robert Peel thus ridiculed Lord John Russell’s pretensions to be the successor of Mr. Hus-

kisson, he at the same time adopted Mr. Huskisson's measures, and claimed for himself full right to follow them up :—

“ I can say with truth, notwithstanding the observations of the Noble Lord, that there was no man in this House from whom Mr. Huskisson derived a more cordial and invariable support than he derived from me. I know not whether the principles on which he acted are unpopular now or not; but *I do not hesitate to declare that I did at that time cordially support the proposals made by Mr. Huskisson, and that the result of those measures has confirmed me in the wisdom of that course.* The Noble Lord seemed to consider that Mr. Huskisson met with a cold and hesitating support from his colleagues, and from the party who generally acted in concurrence with him; but this I know, and I may appeal to the Noble Lord (Lord Palmerston) to confirm my statement, that Mr. Huskisson assigned as one of his chief reasons for joining the Duke of Wellington in 1828, that he would have me as a colleague, from whom he had previously received constant and cordial support in his commercial measures.”

This emphatic approval of Mr. Huskisson's measures, and of the application generally of Free Trade principles, was made before the dissolution in 1841; thus giving due warning to the Conservative party, and to the public generally, that Sir Robert Peel held himself free to introduce similar measures, should he consider it expedient to do so. In the debate upon the Address at the meeting of the new Parliament, in August, 1841, and before the division which led to the retirement of Lord Melbourne, and to Sir Robert Peel being called to power, he reiterated the same opinions. He protested against the conclusion, that because he opposed the Whig budget he was to be held as implying an opinion “ adverse to the removal of restrictions on commerce, or hostile to the doctrines of Free Trade;” and went on to say, that in professing—

“A general conviction of the truth of the principles of Free Trade, I cannot be charged with a new or hasty adoption of them. When I was Secretary of State in 1825, I was intrusted with the preparation of the Speech from the Throne, and I recommended the removal of restrictions on commerce in a manner, as it appears to me, more calculated to promote that removal and to make it acceptable and satisfactory than the mode which has been adopted by the Government opposite, of trying the principle of Free Trade as a mere scheme of financial policy.”

He then quoted the King's Speech of 1825, congratulating the country upon the success of the measures already passed, and recommending a further removal of restrictions upon commerce; and added—

“I may again say, when the Right Honourable Gentleman talks of assuming the mantle of Mr. Huskisson, I can say with truth that I did cordially co-operate with Mr. Huskisson in his financial measures, and that I did receive from Mr. Huskisson the assurance that from no member of the Government had he received more cordial support than from myself in carrying his measures, and in mitigating the difficulties with which he had to contend.”

The preceding extracts, when read in connection with those applicable to Sir Robert Peel's conduct prior to 1830, are amply sufficient to account for the opinions expressed by Lord Melbourne and Mr. Disraeli, in 1845 and 1842. They show, moreover, whatever may have been the case in particular constituencies, and with reference to the ultra-Tory section of the Conservative party, that the result of the general election never could be held to amount to a decision against the removal of restrictions on commerce, or hostile to the cautious application of the doctrines of Free Trade. It was a decision against the Government of the day, and their individual measures—

against allowing an incapable Ministry to tamper with delicate financial and commercial questions. But it left Sir Robert Peel and all those who concurred in his views upon those questions—all Conservatives of the Pitt and Canning school, free to be parties to a more extended application of the liberal principles of mercantile policy, which Mr. Pitt had been the first to bring into practical operation, and which had been followed up by the Tory Governments of 1824, 1825, and 1826, provided the progress of political knowledge and the varying circumstances of the world rendered such a policy in their opinion expedient and conducive to the public benefit. But they also prove, and that beyond the possibility of cavil, the correctness of the statement made at the outset of these remarks, viz. that the large section of Conservatives who supported the measures of 1846 were not in thus acting guilty of treachery to their friends, and did not abandon Conservative principles, and adopt the principles of the Whigs, inasmuch as *first*, the application of the principles of Free Trade did not originate with the Whigs, but with Mr. Pitt, and was afterwards followed up by the successors of Mr. Pitt; *secondly*, the Conservative party was organized for objects and upon grounds irrespective altogether of any question affecting the removal of commercial restrictions; and *thirdly*, it reckoned among its members, nay, had selected for its leaders, statesmen who were known to have been cordial supporters, in the face of obloquy and vituperation similar to that with which they have lately been assailed, of all Mr. Huskisson's measures, and to be friendly to the utmost possible relaxation of commercial restrictions, consistent with the security of the revenue, and that even at the risk of

inflicting some injury on the interests more immediately affected.

Such being the real position of parties and of individual statesmen in regard to the principles of Free Trade, and their application to existing commercial restrictions, it still remains to be considered whether there was anything so peculiar in the position of Sir Robert Peel and those Conservatives who acted with him in 1846, in relation to the Corn Laws, as to render it an act of treachery in them to consent to the prospective repeal of those laws, or to exclude them from public confidence for acceding to that proposition. The Corn question has been reserved for separate remark, not so much because corn ought to be treated as an exception to the general rules of political economy, but because the conduct of those Conservatives who agreed with Sir Robert Peel in 1846 has been subjected to much more severe animadversion with reference to the repeal of the Corn Laws than the removal of other restrictions upon commerce.

The charge brought against them amounts in one view merely to this, that they changed their opinions on the Corn Laws; that while they were in favour of a certain amount of protection to agriculture in 1841, they gave up that protection in 1846. This charge is unquestionably true. But where is the man to be found with any pretensions to the character of a statesman whose opinions in 1846 on the subject of agricultural protection did not differ materially from those entertained by him in 1841? This change of opinion is not, strictly speaking, the question here under consideration. The point to be considered is, whether there was anything in the position of the Conservatives of the Pitt and Canning school to preclude them on

the score of consistency from being parties to the Corn Law measures of 1846, or which ought fairly to lay them open to the charges of dishonesty and treachery for doing the same things which other men are considered at any rate honest, however mistaken, in acceding to.

As has before been remarked, all men, with the exception of a few abstract-principle legislators, were for protection in 1841. Lord John Russell supported the 8s. duty as a measure of protection; and he frankly stated in his letter to the electors of London in November, 1845, that his opinions on the subject of corn "had undergone a great alteration." Resting his defence of this change of opinion in a great measure on the ground of the serious calamity that had befallen the potato crop, he at the same time intimated

"That the imposition of any duty at present, without a provision for its extinction within a short period, would but prolong a contest already sufficiently fruitful of animosity and discontent. The struggle to make bread scarce and dear, when it is clear that part at least of the additional price goes to increase rent, is a struggle deeply injurious to an aristocracy, which (this quarrel once removed) is strong in property, strong in the construction of our legislature, strong in opinion, strong in ancient associations, and in the memory of immortal services."

Upon these grounds Lord John Russell abandoned, in 1845, the position he had taken up in 1841 and subsequent years, and was followed, with a few exceptions, by the whole Whig party. But to come nearer home. Were Lord Stanley's opinions of 1841 adhered to in 1846? Unquestionably they were not. The representatives of the ultra-Tory party, headed by Sir Richard Vyvyan, are understood to have wished to make Lord Stanley

their leader in 1841, instead of Sir Robert Peel. He had made no such explicit reservation of his right to modify the Corn Law of 1828, as it will immediately be seen Sir Robert Peel did in 1841. He must therefore have sadly disappointed the expectations of his admirers, when in these circumstances he cordially concurred in the Corn Act of 1842, which the Dukes of Richmond and Buckingham held to be a breach of faith with the agricultural party, and against which charge Mr. Disraeli came to the rescue of the Ministry in that year. Lord Stanley's conduct in 1843, when by his Canada Corn Bill he made a much more serious breach in the Corn Law of 1842 than the latter did upon the law of 1828, must have been still more distasteful to the agricultural party. But not content with this, Lord Stanley went a step further in 1845. Although opposed to the prospective total repeal of the Corn Law of 1842, he was not averse in 1845 to a modification of that law, and to a further diminution of agricultural protection. To what extent of alteration Lord Stanley was prepared to agree in 1845 has never been precisely explained; but that he was ready to concur in some alteration, and refused to form an Administration to keep up the law of 1842, never was denied.

In the course of the explanations made in January 26, 1846, in the House of Lords, relative to the resignation of Sir Robert Peel in December 1845, the Duke of Wellington stated that in the Cabinet discussions Sir Robert Peel and others were of opinion that in the event of the ports being opened a considerable alteration in the existing Corn Laws would be rendered absolutely necessary; that to this the majority were opposed, but that "everybody admitted some altera-

tion was necessary,"—"that was admitted by all." In the same debate the Duke of Wellington mentioned that he and others "were called upon to state whether they were disposed to form a Government on the principle of maintaining the existing Corn Laws;" that he would not pretend to say what others answered, but that he himself had declined to form such a Government. Lord Stanley is understood to have been present when the Duke of Wellington made this explanation, and he did not attempt to contradict the account given of the Cabinet discussions, or the statement that all were agreed some further alteration required to be made upon the law of 1842. That Lord Stanley was one of the "others" alluded to as having declined to form a Protection Cabinet had before been made public by a letter, dated December 24th, 1845, and read by Lord Norreys at a meeting in Oxfordshire, stating, upon the authority of Lord Stanley, "that he would neither have consented at the time when Sir Robert Peel resigned to form an Administration, nor would he now undertake to do so."*

Lord Stanley having thus been a party to the measure of 1842, and the author of the Canada Corn Bill of 1843, and having, moreover, in consequence of the peculiar position of matters in 1845, been ready to accede to some alteration on the law of 1842, and having also refused to take the responsibility of forming a Protection Government in 1845, is nevertheless lauded for his honesty and consistency, and as having done no violence to the opinions expressed by him in 1841. And this being the case, it is certainly very difficult to understand how, in common fairness, Sir

**I*vide Spectator, January 17, 1846, p. 53.

Robert Peel, and those who agreed with him, should be charged with treachery to the agricultural interest, and with abandoning their principles, merely because they thought that the circumstances of the country required a greater alteration in the law of 1842 than Lord Stanley considered necessary, and because they also thought it for the interest of all parties, and especially of the agricultural body, to fix a period, after which it would be better not to keep up even the reduced amount of protection.

The Corn Laws, which stand repealed at the end of three years by the Act of 1846, were introduced in peculiar circumstances. It is well known, that in order to meet the very extraordinary state of matters brought about by the duration of the French revolutionary war, a very heavy duty was laid upon the the importation of foreign corn by the law of 1815, a duty amounting to an absolute restriction upon importation until the average price rose to 80s. a quarter. This was soon felt to be a disadvantageous arrangement; and in April, 1822, Mr. Huskisson moved a series of resolutions recommending a considerable alteration in the law of 1815. So complete had been the change effected by that law, as compared with the state of matters prior to 1815, that one of those resolutions went the length of affirming "that a Free Trade in foreign corn, subject to certain duties on the importation thereof for home consumption, was at all times permitted prior to the Act 55 Geo. III. c. 26." The other resolutions also proceeded upon the assumption that the Act 55 Geo. III. required to be materially modified; and although none of them were then agreed to, Mr. Huskisson's colleagues, and the late Marquis of Lon-

donderry in particular, did not dispute the general principles involved in them, which appear to have formed the basis of the bills introduced in 1827 and 1828.

The Corn Law of 1815 having been thus framed to suit a particular state of things, and with the evident intention of its being altered, or even repealed, as soon as the circumstances of the country rendered that advisable, it was considerably modified and altered in 1828. When a change was first proposed in 1827, the Ministry were even then charged with inconsistency in departing from the arrangements made in 1815. But they were defended by Sir Robert Peel, at that time in office with Mr. Canning, upon the ground that the altered state of the country made it necessary to modify the law; and it was contended that the alterations in the currency alone were such, "that it was quite impossible to impute inconsistency to any man, who in 1827* condemned the continuance of the measure which he supported in 1815." The bill of 1827 was thrown out in the House of Lords; but in the following year another bill, embodying fully as extensive an alteration in the law of 1815, was carried through by the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel.

From 1828 to 1841 periodical attacks were made upon the Corn Law of the former year, but unaccompanied by any proposal for a general revision of our commercial system. These attacks were resisted by the Whig Administrations of Earl Grey and Lord Melbourne, and until 1841 the idea never seemed to have occurred to the Whig party to introduce, as a

* March 8.

Government measure, any alteration in the Corn Law of 1828. Such a proposal would have at once detached the whole Whig aristocracy from the Government.

In 1841, however, the 8s. fixed duty was proposed by Lord Melbourne. When this was done, did Sir Robert Peel oppose it upon the ground that it was an alteration of the law of 1828, and that it was essential to keep up that law? By no means. He distinctly reserved to himself, on the question of the Corn Laws, the same freedom of action as in the removal of other restrictions; viz., unlimited power to remodel the Act of 1828, so as to lessen the amount of protection, and suit that measure to the altered circumstances of the times. Further, in the debate in August, 1841, he repudiated the support of the agricultural body, unless he was to have "the unfettered discretion of considering and amending the existing law." As regards this reservation of his right to use his own discretion in proposing any alteration he might consider necessary upon the Corn Laws, Sir Robert Peel is reported to have spoken as follows on the 27th of August, 1841:—

"I now approach the more important and exciting question of the Corn Laws. In order that I may make no mistake, allow me to refer to the expressions which I made use of on this point before the dissolution. I said, that on consideration I had formed an opinion which intervening consideration had not induced me to alter, that the principle of a graduated scale was preferable to that of a fixed and irrevocable duty—but I said then, and I say now, and in doing so I repeat the language I held in 1839, that I will not bind myself to the details of the existing law, but will reserve to myself the unfettered discretion of considering and amending that law. I hold the same language now—

but if you ask me whether I bind myself to the maintenance of the existing law in its details, or if you say that that is the condition on which the agricultural interest gave me their support, I say that on that condition I will not accept their support."

This was a very clear and explicit, and, what is of more importance, a timely declaration of the position in which Sir Robert Peel stood in relation to his agricultural supporters, and ought of itself to preclude them from bringing any such charges against him as those in which even their leaders in the House of Commons have allowed themselves to have recourse to. But the following passage from the same speech contains a still more explicit intimation of how he would consider himself bound to act in circumstances of general distress, in the event of his being satisfied that a repeal of the Corn Laws would be calculated in any degree to alleviate that distress:—

"If I could bring myself to think—if I could believe that an alteration of the Corn Laws would preclude the risk of such distress, if I thought it would be an effectual remedy, in all cases, against such instances of lamentable suffering as those which have been described, I would say at once to the agricultural interest, 'It is for your advantage rather to submit to any reduction of price than, if an alteration of the Corn Laws would really be the cure for their sufferings, to compel their continuance.' I should say that it would be for the interest, not of the community in general, but especially of the agriculturists themselves, if, by any sacrifice of theirs, they could prevent the existence of such distress. If any sacrifice of theirs could prevent their being the real cause of the distress—could prevent the continuance of it—could offer a guarantee against the recurrence of it, I would earnestly advise a relaxation, an alteration, nay, if necessary, a Repeal of the Corn Laws."

Sir Robert Peel having thus reserved to himself

unlimited discretion to deal with the Corn Laws, and with the application of the principles of Free Trade, in whatever way the circumstances of the country might require, it does seem to be the height of absurdity, to say nothing of the injustice of the proceeding, to endeavour to hold him, and those of his supporters who were all along known to entertain liberal views on commercial policy, up to public odium, as for ever unfit to take any part in the management of affairs, simply because they were of opinion in 1845 that the very alarming circumstances of the country rendered it imperative to introduce an extensive alteration of the laws regulating the importation of foreign produce and manufactures. That Sir Robert Peel and his leading colleagues in the Ministry were free to do this, and that in perfect consistency with their former professions, must have now been proved to the satisfaction of every candid and unprejudiced man; and that there are, therefore, no grounds whatsoever for charging them either with hypocrisy or desertion, will be made equally clear to any man who calmly considers the very peculiar and trying position of the country at the time when these alterations were proposed.

It is unnecessary, as matters now stand, to recapitulate the circumstances which led to the Cabinet discussions in 1845, and to the introduction of the measures of 1846. However much the failure of the potato crop, and the probability of that failure bringing about a scarcity of provisions, may have been ridiculed in the spring of 1846, it is now a sad reality; and it is impossible to conceive that, had the Corn Laws of 1842 existed in 1846, any ten men would have been found in either House of Parliament bold

enough to undertake the responsibility of resisting their repeal. The position of this country relative to the supply of food even in the end of 1845 was sufficient to create very great anxiety and alarm, and to tax to the utmost the energy and sagacity of statesmen. It led Lord John Russell to advise an immediate repeal of the Corn Laws, in opposition to his opinions of 1841. It led Lord Stanley to think a further alteration should be made in the law of 1842; and it led the Central Protection Society to resolve upon the propriety of opening the ports. And was Sir Robert Peel, of all men, to be alone precluded in such circumstances from exercising his discretion, and was he alone to be charged with dishonesty and treachery in advising the remedy which he thought the state of the country imperatively required? If men with inferior sources of information were ready to open the ports, without knowing how they were ever again to be closed; and if men of confessedly inferior capacity, foresight, and experience as statesmen to Sir Robert Peel, "a minister," as the 'Quarterly Review' admits, "of unrivalled talents, and of the maturest experience,"* saw in the anticipated failure of the supply of food enough to justify them, the one in abandoning altogether in 1846 the protection he thought necessary in 1841, and the other in changing the law of 1842, is no latitude to be allowed to the Minister charged with the responsibility of providing against the anticipated evils? Is his conduct, and that of his supporters, in agreeing with the one, and thinking it necessary to go somewhat further than the other, to be charged with nothing short of treachery

* 'Quarterly Review' for March, 1847.

to their party and desertion of their friends, while the conduct of those others is praised as honest and consistent? Considered in this point of view, the question admits of but one answer. Sir Robert Peel may have formed a wrong opinion; his measures may turn out to be productive of no good, or, it may be, of much evil. That, however, remains to be proved; and until it is proved, it is nothing less than gross injustice to condemn him and the Conservatives who went along with him, much more so to charge them with treachery and desertion of their friends for introducing the measures of 1846.

Whatever opinions may have been expressed in 1845 and 1846 as to the exaggerated nature of the evils, and as to these having been exaggerated to suit the purposes of the moment, no man can now say that Sir Robert Peel was unnecessarily alarmed. Already are men beginning to view matters in a very different light, and to give credit to whom credit is due. In the recent number of the 'Quarterly Review' Sir Robert Peel's foresight and sagacity are admitted. While great fault is found with him as having done much harm by his measures of 1846, and it is regretted that he did not have recourse to some temporary measure of relief, thereby preventing the "fracture of his party" and the evils the Reviewer already anticipates from the Government of his successors, he is at the same time spoken of as "understanding and anticipating, as he certainly did far more clearly and fully than any other statesman in England, the nature, the growth, and the ultimate magnitude of the evil as respected the potato cultivation."

And if this be the case, if Sir Robert Peel's saga-

city led him to discern what others saw darkly, or doubted altogether, may not the very same sagacity have led him to judge aright as to the remedy, although others, who judged wrong as to the extent of the evil, may still fancy themselves infallible as to the treatment they recommended for a disease which they admit they did not understand? And did it never in these circumstances occur to the Reviewer and his friends that the fracture of the party was not altogether chargeable against Sir Robert Peel? If men had been at pains calmly and dispassionately to consider the measures of 1846; if instead, of allowing themselves to be hurried on by Lord George Bentinck and Mr. Disraeli, and to charge with dishonesty, and with falsifying returns, statesmen who are certainly as little likely to be guilty of such practices as their accusers, they had patiently waited the result; if the Quarterly Reviewer, instead of giving the colour of his influential support to an opposition rested upon allegations which have turned out to be rash and erroneous, had suspended his judgment till the extent of the calamity was disclosed, and had made the same allowance for the sagacity of the Minister which he has all along done for the purity of the man, then perhaps might others of less capacity than the Reviewer have abstained from the tactics which overthrew the late Administration, and might have hesitated to bring about that disorganization of the Conservative party which the Reviewer now laments, and which, by rashly censuring and judging, the more violent section of the Protectionists have had their own share in producing.

It is not uncommon to hear people say that "they do not so much object to the Corn Laws being repealed,

as to the manner in which it was done." They admit that the scarcity of 1845 and the famine of 1846 have proved Sir Robert Peel to be right. The Corn Laws they allow could not have been maintained, but they blame the mode in which they were surrendered. To say nothing of the captious nature of such an objection, with reference to an important course of policy at a great national crisis, though it sounds much the same as if those who were saved from shipwreck should afterwards criticise the mere manner or demeanour of the pilot who preserved them--independently of this consideration, the objection itself is entirely groundless. Its proposers, when asked what other method of doing this unavoidable thing they would have preferred, generally answer that if the danger of famine was so great, the minister should have opened the ports, and should then have called his party together and given them due warning, if any permanent change in the Corn Laws was considered necessary. Mr. Miles stated in the House of Commons that a suggestion made by him to open the ports "met with the most enthusiastic applause" from a company of tenant farmers;—and this is the manner in which it is now contended by many that Sir Robert Peel should have acted. This, then, is the omission of which he is said to have been guilty. If therefore it can be shown that he and those who went along with him are free from this censure, they must be acquitted altogether, at least by one section of their accusers.

Now what are the facts? When famine was impending, the first step taken by Sir Robert Peel was to propose the opening of the ports, the very measure which he is now blamed for not adopting. In that proposal he was unsuccessful, not because his own

anxiety for it was small, but because the majority of his colleagues differed from him in opinion. His public statement on this point is clear and conclusive.

“ It appeared to me, however, that the reports received from the Lord-Lieutenant—that the examples of foreign countries—that the example of Belgium, which had cleared the market of Liverpool almost in one day, and had caused a rise of 75 per cent. in the price of rice—rendered it the duty of the Government to take a step which was not without a precedent, and either by an Order in Council, or by calling Parliament together within a fortnight, to remove for a time all restrictions upon the importation of foreign corn. That was the advice I gave on the 1st of November. I was perfectly ready to take the responsibility of issuing an Order in Council. The period was a critical one. There was an advantage in issuing an Order in Council, for time would thus have been saved; and I was prepared, as the head of the Government, to take that responsibility. I did not insist, however, upon the Order in Council; for I was equally prepared to call Parliament together immediately, and to advise the removal, for a limited period, of all restrictions on the importation of corn. I did not consider it any objection that the temporary removal of those restrictions might compel a reconsideration of the Tariff. My advice at that period was not followed. Three only of my colleagues concurred in the view which I took, and we separated on the 6th of November; I reserving to myself the right of again calling the Cabinet together, in the hope that if the alarm which I apprehended should be confirmed by subsequent occurrences, the advice which I gave would be followed at a later period.”*

When this later period arrived, similar advice was tendered to the Cabinet, although, as Sir Robert Peel said, “the lapse of time, the increase of agitation, and other circumstances, had materially affected his posi-

* Hansard, p. 87.

tion." But that advice was again rejected, and in particular by Lord Stanley, who thought the danger had been magnified; and the result was, that Sir Robert Peel, not being able to obtain a united Cabinet—an essential element in so important a crisis—resigned.

If a united Cabinet had then concurred in the course proposed, the aspect of matters would have been changed, and events would have followed in a different order. A temporary suspension of the Corn Laws would have taken place, and in that event those who now declare that such is the course Sir Robert Peel should have pursued, and who have recently evinced their own readiness to open the ports, cannot surely continue to blame him when they reflect that this was the very course which he proposed, but which he was prevented from following by a majority of his Cabinet. The failure of that proposal led to other results which will immediately be noticed. But it can never in common fairness be denounced as treason to the Conservative party to have advocated that very policy of which many leading Protectionists have since professed their approval.

It is, no doubt, true that the opening of the ports would have involved a reconsideration of the Corn Laws before the ports could again be shut. For that necessity, however, Sir Robert Peel could not in any view be responsible. It arose from the very nature of things. It was the one main ground on which a portion of the Ministry resisted the opening of the ports when first proposed. But if it was right to take that step for the safety of human life, it was right and necessary to run the risk that was involved in it.

If, indeed, Sir Robert Peel and those who agreed

with him had tried to conceal that risk—if he had recommended the temporary expedient of opening the ports, and had kept in the background the new condition in which the question of protection would again present itself—he might with some justice be charged with that betrayal of his friends which is now so groundlessly imputed to him. It might then have been said that he had treacherously led his party into a position where they were unconsciously placed at the mercy of their opponents. But the very reverse of all this was the conduct he pursued; and it is not impossible that much of the difficulty with which he had to contend arose from the very candour and freedom with which his opinions and anticipations were expressed. If he had been allowed to follow the policy he had marked out, his explanations to his party at large would have been equally open and explicit. That he was prevented from doing this may not be matter of blame to any one, but least of all can it form a charge against himself.

The refusal of a majority of the Cabinet to concur in opening the ports, and the delay that took place, as well as the public excitement that arose in connexion with the state of the country, soon gave to the whole crisis a new appearance of difficulty and danger. When the Cabinet ceased to be unanimous, and continued at variance even upon the preliminary question proposed to them, Sir Robert Peel ceased to be Minister, and made room for any successor that might be called upon to fill his place; and it has been shown that neither when he resigned, nor when Lord John Russell failed to construct a cabinet, was any Protectionist party prepared to assume the responsibility of office. Sir Robert Peel was thus recalled to power

as the only minister who could form a Cabinet; but he returned under circumstances and engagements entirely new. The only question that now remained was, how to serve the Queen and save the country, and how best to escape or mitigate the horrors of that calamity which few but himself had the wisdom to foresee. He was then fully entitled and imperatively called upon to follow out his own convictions, as he was left to act on his own responsibility; and perverted indeed must be the minds of those who, in looking to what he did, can find fault with the manner while they acquiesce in the result, or can criticise the form when they do not object to the substance of the measures. Any Ministry that accepted office after Lord John Russell's failure to form one, was under an obligation to settle the Corn Law question; and well it was for the country, and for all classes of the community, that a question involving elements so fearful as those which attend a famine was timefully set at rest by the prudence and patriotism of a Cabinet guided by the ablest statesman of the age. It would have been a sad hour for the aristocracy of England, and for all the institutions which the Conservative party are sworn to protect, if their preservation had come to be regarded by a famishing people as a standing obstacle in the way of an easier access to the means of subsistence.

As it is, however, one result of the measure of 1846 has been, that the Conservative party is, for the present at least, to all appearances much disorganized. That great party which Sir Robert Peel was the chief instrument in building up, by means, as he himself used to say, of strengthening and "widening the foundations" on which it was originally reared,—that

great party, formed to defend the Protestant Church from spoliation, and maintain on their ancient footing our institutions in Church and State, but which was at the same time not opposed to rational changes required by the lapse of years or the altered circumstances of society,—which, resisting organic changes in the Constitution, professed itself friendly to all practical and economical reforms, and was led to victory by men who were the colleagues of Mr. Canning and the disciples of Mr. Pitt,—which, in 1841, found our Indian empire shaken to its centre, and our relations with America and with France in a most precarious condition, and which, under the same guidance, re-established our connexion with France on a satisfactory footing, adjusted the threatened disputes in the West, and restored tranquillity in the East,—which in 1841 found the Exchequer empty, the revenue insufficient to meet the expenditure, and the public debt yearly increasing, and which under the same guidance remodelled our financial and commercial policy so as to replenish the Exchequer, raise the revenue far above the expenditure, and reduce the public debt,—and which, had those who composed it known their own interests and received the measures of 1846 in a spirit suited to the exigencies of the times, might have stood upon a firmer footing than any party had ever done since the days of Mr. Pitt,—that great party has apparently now been broken up, and by what? solely in consequence of the introduction of measures based upon an application of principles of commercial policy, opposition to which never formed an essential in the creed of the Conservative body—principles which had always been professed and acted upon by their chosen leaders since

the time of Mr. Pitt. That party is said to be broken up, and its disorganization has at all events cleared the way for the restoration to office of men whom the Conservative party had opposed as unworthy of public confidence long before they had proposed any plan for altering the Corn Laws, and who are described in the article in the 'Quarterly Review' just referred to as "entirely incompetent for conducting either our finances with discretion or our police with firmness, or of maintaining that attitude of dignity in the sight of the world at large, which is essential to the tranquillity of Europe."

What is to be the result of all this it is difficult to predict. Already, however, in one portion of the British empire, the severity with which its calamities are pressing upon it begins to be traced in public opinion to the absence from the helm of affairs of the man best fitted to grapple with the difficulties of the times, and that by no supporters of the policy of the late Administration. An article on the state of Ireland in the April number of the 'Dublin University Magazine,' a periodical of talent and reputation, and which, though decidedly opposed to the measures of Sir Robert Peel, has the candour and straightforwardness to do justice to their author, contains the following passage:—

"It was, however, the misfortune of famine-stricken Ireland, and a deep misfortune almost all men in Ireland now feel it to be, that party combinations (we say not now how justifiable or honourable) removed from office the man who had shown himself alone, perhaps, of living statesmen, alive to the exigencies of the crisis, and capable of boldly and effectually meeting them. It was an occasion on which no statesman could efficiently serve his country out of office.

* * * * * With the removal of Peel from office, he lost the power of even assisting to obviate the danger, which, we do believe, had he remained in office, he would successfully have met."

Such, according to a well-informed writer, in the opinion of "almost all men in Ireland," are some of the first-fruits of that party combination which led to the retirement of Sir Robert Peel. What is to follow no man can tell; and the preceding remarks cannot be better concluded than by giving the following extract from the same able periodical in relation to the motives which led to the repeal of the Corn Laws, and which points out some of the evils, and those no slight ones, which have been warded off by the measures of 1846 :—

"Our sketch of this part of our history would be incomplete without alluding to the Repeal of the Corn Laws, by which the Session of 1846 was ushered in. On that question this periodical has already strongly and distinctly expressed its opinion, and that opinion it forms no part of the object of this article to qualify or retract. Sir Robert Peel stated, however, in Parliament, that the determination of Ministers to settle the question was forced on by their anticipation of an Irish famine—that he and his colleagues felt it would be impossible to maintain the protection during that famine—and that the ports, once opened to avert starvation, never could be closed—that the agitation of the question of the Corn Laws in a famine, when arguments in favour of cheap bread could carry with them such a deep appeal to the passions and sympathies of the human heart, would go far to break up society altogether. The coming of the Irish famine was that which, he stated, forced the Ministry to perhaps a premature decision upon the question—and we well remember the deep and solemn warning in which, with all the authority of a Premier, he predicted the coming of a calamity in Ireland, of which no one could know

or measure the extent. * * * * *

Time has already done justice to the speech to which we have referred. Predictions that even from Sir Robert Peel were looked upon as the exaggerations of the politician, events have proved to be but the language of caution. Every man can now feel the pressure under which he acted in the nearer view of the calamity that is now upon us; we can appreciate the sagacity that foresaw the full extent of the calamity that was coming, and we can understand the feeling under which the Premier sacrificed party associations and power, and cherished friends, to what he believed to be his duty. Thus far, at least, time has vindicated his conduct; and who is there that does not feel with what immeasurable power for evil over the passions of the multitude, the agitator for a Free Trade in Corn could now have directed the fury of the mob against the corn-law lords, by denouncing their monopoly as the cause of the horrors of Skibbereen? All this, it is true, leaves untouched the question, whether the Corn Laws ought to be maintained or not; but a calm and impartial estimate of events must decide, that of all the motives which in that memorable speech Sir Robert Peel declared to have influenced his mind, time has proved and tested the power and the strength."

All this may "leave untouched the question whether the Corn Laws ought to have been maintained." But it does not leave untouched the question of the honesty and consistency of that section of the Conservative party which supported their repeal. They believed in 1846 the predictions which "events have proved to have been but the language of caution," and the truth of which "time has tested and proved." Looking upon the Corn Laws as a practical question, a mere measure of expediency, which had before been made to yield to the force of events, they could see nothing inconsistent in holding that these laws should be made to bend still further, in order to meet a force of events which no human laws could ever for a moment have withstood. Believing that the time had come when

a relaxation of those laws, with a provision for their ultimate repeal, might be made without injury to the agriculturists and with benefit to the community, and was moreover imperatively required as being well calculated to mitigate the anticipated calamity, and to ward off the "immeasurable power for evil" which the attempt to keep up those laws in a time of famine would give—"a power for evil which might go far to break up society altogether," they threw in their lot with that of the authors of the measure of 1846. In doing this they felt that they were fulfilling a public duty; while they could see no grounds—and it is believed that when the heats and animosities that necessarily attend such changes shall have passed away, an impartial public will see no grounds—on which they ought to forfeit the good opinion of their former friends, or could justly be charged with deserting the principles which were the basis of their union in 1836, and which may still be the bond of future co-operation in every thing that affects the safety of the country or the constitution.

