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~~University of Aberdeen~~ 1873



COMPLETE SUFFRAGE.

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SPEECH

OF

JAMES ADAM, Esquire,

EDITOR OF THE ABERDEEN HERALD,

AT

A PUBLIC MEETING

OF THE

INHABITANTS OF ABERDEEN,

HELD IN

MACHRAY'S PAVILION,

ON WEDNESDAY, 18<sup>TH</sup> MAY, 1842.

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ABERDEEN:

PRINTED AT THE HERALD OFFICE,  
BY JOHN FINLAYSON.

1842.



THE following Speech is published at the request of several gentlemen who heard it delivered, and who think that it contains a clear exposition and satisfactory vindication of the principles adopted at the Birmingham Conference. If it shall be the means of counteracting the groundless alarm with which many of the middle classes regard the prospect of a thorough radical reform, or of allaying the unjust suspicions and jealousies that are prevalent among a few of the leaders of the working-classes, its author's object will be fully accomplished.

Men who rightly read the signs of the times must see that the general breaking up of parties which is now taking place, is only the precursor of a state of things in which the struggle will be not between conformers and expediency-mongers, but between the asserters of political equality on the one hand, and the sticklers for class-supremacy on the other. Each side will have to take its stand on solid ground, and carry out its principles to their just conclusion, unmindful of consequences. There will be no room for a middle party, either of Conservatives or Whigs. The choice will lie between adherence to the divine-right dogmas of the ultra-Tories, or a practical recognition of the theoretical Whig doctrine, that the people are the only legitimate source of power. Does any one require to be told which side must ultimately triumph ?

HERALD OFFICE, ABERDEEN,  
24th May, 1842.

## COMPLETE SUFFRAGE.

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I APPEAR before you with more diffidence, and yet, paradoxical as it may seem, with greater confidence than I have ever felt in addressing any public meeting. I have well-grounded fears lest I should not be able to do justice to the important subject on which I have to speak ; but, at the same time, I have the utmost faith in the soundness and excellence of the principles I am about to expound. My advocacy may be weak, but my cause is all-powerful, and I am firmly persuaded that it must ultimately triumph, in spite of the ability and influence of its foes, or the shortcomings and insufficiency of its friends—(cheers). But I wish not to declaim. My object is to appeal to your judgment, not to your passions—to make such a statement of facts as you shall find to be accurate, and advance such arguments as shall appear to you conclusive, when you have time for careful examination and cool reflection. The Birmingham Conference, of which I had the honour to be a member, originated in the necessities of the times. The condition of the country and the state of parties alike called for some new movement. Commercial crises and depressions of trade—which formerly came at long intervals, and lasted but a little while—seemed about to become the rule rather than the exception. For years, the distress in the manufacturing districts had been going on increasing without any prospect of mitigation—starvation had already reached hundreds, and stared thousands of the working classes in the face ; and, for the middle classes, there seemed nothing in prospect but bankruptcy and ruin. The general belief was that bad legislation was at the root of the evil, and this conviction at length reached the Whig Government, who, although somewhat late in the day, proposed a change in our commercial code, founded on something like sound principles. The change was opposed by the Conservatives from party motives. Parliament was dissolved—a new election came on—and the reform constituency, in opposition to the wishes and wants of the country—nay, probably, in opposition to their own real wishes—but influenced by bribery, intimidation, and other corrupt practices—returned a large majority pledged to uphold monopoly in all its integrity. It is true that an inroad has been made on monopoly, even by this monopoly-pledged Parliament. It is true that we have obtained a change in the tariff, which, as far as it goes, is good. Nay, it is true that, in bringing on his new tariff, the other day, Sir Robert Peel delivered



a speech embodying the soundest principles of commercial policy, and breathing a spirit of liberality truly excellent. But to what are we indebted for the good contained in the new tariff, or the liberal professions of the Premier's speech? Not our representative system—not our reformed constituency. What we have got of free trade, like many other benefits realized by this country, has been got in spite of the erroneous constitution of the legislature, not in consequence of its excellence—(cheers). Do you believe that Sir Robert Peel's free-trade measures are approved of by a majority of his supporters? Are you at a loss to interpret the ominous silence with which the noblest passages in his speech have been received by the benches behind him?—or do you overlook the fact that, whenever any of his friends get up to speak, it is to condemn what he has done, and promise to support it on grounds altogether apart from its justice or propriety? The truth is, that we are indebted to the shrewdness of the Premier for what has been granted. Placed in power, with all the facilities of obtaining information that are afforded by official aid, he sees plainly that something must be done—some concession made to the claims of industry, if the country is to be saved from utter ruin; and, perceiving this—although he is the chosen champion of monopoly, and although he is upheld by a majority who have bought, bribed, and intimidated their way to the House of Commons, for the very purpose of upholding monopoly—he begins to knock down restrictions and prohibitions, as if his vocation had been solely that of a free trader. And how, it may be asked, dare he do so?—what excuse can he offer to his monopoly-loving friends? A man in power has many means of influencing his followers. There can be no doubt that, in this instance, Sir Robert plainly told the Tories that, if they did not accept his measures, they would, in the first instance, lose all the influence and advantage of being the party in power; and that, besides, they would run the risk of having measures of a more sweeping character forced upon them. Nay, he would hardly hesitate to point out to them the possibility of a little anarchy, confusion, and bloodshed, in the distance, if things were allowed to go on in this way—(cheers). And would not this have its effect? To look even at the first consideration—Do you believe that the places and influence held by the Gordon family had no weight with the honourable and gallant member for this county in making him support the new tariff in opposition to the wishes of the great majority of his constituents? Thus you see that what good we have obtained has been got in spite of our representative system—in opposition to the views with which the majority of the House of Commons has been returned—(cheers). It has been a concession—a reluctant one, but still a concession to the unrepresented and to the necessities of the country—(cheers). Nor has it been got for nothing. The prohibitions on cattle and meat have been sacrificed

to save the monster monopolies of corn and sugar. The influence of the landlord and the wealth of the West Indian have been great enough to prevent Sir Robert Peel from carrying out his principles ; and the poor are still to refund, in the enhanced value of two of the prime necessities of life, the money that the aristocracy expended at the last election, with the view, if possible, of upholding all their monopolies—(cheers). Nor is this all, Sir Robert Peel will not, or dare not, propose a reduction of the unnecessary expenditure of the country ; he dare not equalize taxation ; he dare not impose the same duty on transmission of a duke's property to his heir, near or distant, as he imposes on the moveables of a widow woman of the middle classes ; he dare not fully relieve the springs of industry, and, consequently, he has to resort to new taxation. In the same imperative mood in which he carries his tariff against the grumbling of the foolish squires, he carries his income tax—with all its inquisitorialness, all its anomaly, and all its injustice—in spite of the reasonable remonstrances of able and upright men—(cheers). Through this tyrannical and oppressive engine, the middle classes will have to pay dear for the little good they derive from the tariff ; and in too many instances the hurden will fall indirectly on the already overloaded working-man—(cheers). Now, granting that Sir Robert Peel has done some good—granting, as I believe, that he has done more than the Whigs durst have attempted—I ask you if it is a proper state of things to have that good despotically accomplished by the fiat of one man, in opposition to what ought to be a representation of the wishes of the country ?—nay, more, is this good a counterbalance for the new evil, to say nothing of the abuses that are still left to vex and oppress the people ? I believe you will answer, No ; and this was the answer that the men who originated and have hitherto carried on the Birmingham movement gave. They saw that things were wrong ; they saw that there was no hope from either of the two great political parties, so long as the representation remains in its present state. They saw the Whigs defeated—broken, dispirited, rendered useless—so soon as they attempted to turn the legislative machine they themselves had contrived to a really good purpose ; and they felt that relief must be looked for from some other quarter. They naturally turned their eyes to the large and increasing body of Parliamentary reformers. They looked not merely to the Chartist movement, which had been labouring for years, and which had effected much good in so far as it had spread among the people a knowledge of their political rights, and a desire to obtain them ; but they looked also to the large portion of the middle and working classes who had retired from political conflict in disgust at what they regarded as the pusillanimous conduct of the Whigs, and in despair of seeing any movement that they could depend upon being carried on peacefully, rationally, and with hopes of success. To

bring the moral weight and influence of these parties into play, and to produce a friendly feeling, if not a cordial union, between them and the working classes, so that an effectual agitation for political and social amelioration might be begun and carried out, was the grand object of the Birmingham union. Such being the aim and end of the movement, the question was, What ground should be taken up? and here, luckily, large and liberal views prevailed. The Birmingham Conference set out by affirming the grand principle that every member of society has an equal right with every other member to a voice in the management of the affairs of society—(cheers). And having affirmed this abstract principle, they resolved to define the extent to which they desire to see it presently applied, by the well-understood and popular plan of male adult suffrage, or an extension of the franchise to “every man of twenty-one years of age, who is not deprived of the rights of citizenship in consequence of the verdict of a jury of his countrymen.” Now, I am aware, Mr. Chairman, that the assertion of the right of suffrage has been much cavilled at, and that many witty and clever people have attempted to sneer down every one who upholds it as an abstract principle. I trust I shall be able to show that the objections are fallacious, and that those who have adopted the opinion from an instinctive belief in its soundness, may also, if they be so inclined, bear it out by strict logical reasoning. I admit that to vest the right of suffrage in males of twenty-one years of age is an arbitrary arrangement. Nay, representation itself is a clumsy mode of giving every member of society an equal share in the management of the affairs of society, for it is hard that *nine* men shall be obliged to submit to the *dictum* of *ten*. Yet, as it is better that the nine should submit to the ten, than that the ten should submit to the nine; so it is much better that we should have the nearest practicable approximation to the abstract right, than an arrangement which makes no approximation whatever to the abstract right, and which is the cause of general dissatisfaction and loudly-expressed discontent. The reason why our opponents have been able to take hold of us is, that there are ignorant men, who have been foolish enough to declare that the extension of the franchise to every man of twenty-one years of age, and of sane mind, is *justice*. Now, it may be answered, and truly enough, that there is nothing more just in giving the franchise to men of twenty-one years of age than in giving it to women, or to males whom we are accustomed to look upon as minors. The real question of right is to be separated from the question of expediency. There is nothing more in twenty-one years of age, speaking abstractly, than there is in eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty and eleven months, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, or twenty-five; there is nothing more in manhood than there is in womanhood; and, so far as we lay down a distinction between these

parties, it is one that is purely arbitrary, and must be defended not as any abstract principle, but simply because, under all the circumstances, it is the most eligible. It was thus that I agreed to the practical definition of the extent to which the suffrage ought to be demanded. I had my own view—others had theirs; but, at the Birmingham Conference, we found that the greatest amount of opinion was in favour of that limitation which included in the constituency all males above twenty-one years of age, and excluded females and minors; and, submitting to the sound doctrine that, wherever there is a difference not involving principle, the minority should give way to the majority, I readily consented to adopt male adult suffrage as the practical recognition of the right affirmed by the Conference. This was the settlement of the question of *expediency*, but it left the question of *right* untouched. That question I believe, after careful examination, to stand thus—that every person on whom society makes any demand, be it only to obey a police regulation, is entitled to claim a share in making the laws that regulate society—(cheers); and, adopting this wide definition of the term “member of society,” I confess that, in justice, I am not entitled to refuse the suffrage to minors, if they demand it, nor to women, if it be their wish to have it—(cheers and laughter). Such as it is, they possess the right equally with ourselves. I do not say that it can be established positively, but I am fully satisfied that it is susceptible of a complete negative demonstration. I may not be able to prove, incontrovertibly, that I have a right to a share in the management of the affairs of others, but I can make it exceedingly plain that others have no right to manage my affairs without my leave. Now, this is the real question. Supposing myself one of the unenfranchised, I can say truly that government—law making, taxation, and calls for obedience—is my business, so far as it affects me. Nobody has a right to do my business without my leave, directly or indirectly obtained. But I have not given my leave to any one to do these things for me; therefore, any one who attempts to do them is an usurper. In using this argument, I presume that I am speaking to professed Liberals; for, if I had to deal with the supporters of the divine right of kings, aristocrats, or priests, I would have to begin a little farther back. I would have to show that they have no authority for their assumptions. But, believing, as I do, that I am addressing men who took part in the agitation for the Reform Bill, and who have adopted the doctrine that “the people are the legitimate source of power,” I feel my task much lightened. With such, the argument that the parties on whom it is proposed to confer the franchise would make a bad use of it, can have no weight; for they must recollect that the nineteen men who possessed the whole franchise of this town before 1832, could have urged the same reason; and that, at the present day, the King of Prussia professes

to have exactly the same reason for refusing to give any constitution whatever to his subjects. The truth is, that now, as in 1832, it is not the parties who have the power that are allowed to judge; it is those who are without. And any of us who have the franchise, and refuse to confer it on those who are excluded, stand in exactly the same position as the possessors of the franchise, who, in 1832, would have refused to give it to us. Let it be recollected, however, that the right which is unassailable is not male suffrage at twenty-one years of age, any more than it would be female suffrage, or suffrage at any other age; it is the right of every member of society—that is, every person on whom society makes any demand—to have an equal voice in determining what society should do. The Birmingham Conference affirmed this principle, but they felt the necessity, in the nature of things—the same necessity that makes *nine* submit to *ten*—of adopting a practical limitation; and they adopted that limitation which at present promises to give the greatest satisfaction, which most surely precludes objection from the excluded (that being the great matter), the male adult suffrage, in favour of which such a mass of public opinion had already been combined—(cheers). But there are parties who, admitting, or at least not denying the right of all to be represented in the legislature, contend that some should have greater influence than others. They contend that it is unfair to give the man of £20 a-year as much to say as the man of £20,000 a-year. Now, if the legislature had merely to do with money, with the protection of property, and the allocation of taxes, there might be some force in the objection—although, even then, it might be argued that the poor man's all was as valuable to him as the rich man's—(cheers)—and that he had as much need of power to protect himself from over-taxation—(cheers). But it is not so; the legislature has to deal with many things in which all men are not only really but ostensibly equal—(cheers). Do not the peasant and the nobleman value their life equally?—(cheers.) Is not the chastity of a poor man's wife as important to him as is the chastity of her Majesty herself to Prince Albert?—(cheers.) Have not all an equal interest in the criminal law? Are not all equally interested in the defence of the country, and are not all called upon—the poor first, indeed—to take up arms for its defence?—(cheers.) It is folly, then, to clamour about “a stake in the hedge.” All have a stake in the hedge, and, under a good state of things, all would be equally ready to defend their stake, whether it were great or small—(cheers). Even in commercial companies, where money alone, and a part only of the money of the individual, has to be dealt with, the partners never get a share equal to the proportion of their capital. Thus, even where nothing but pecuniary matters are dealt with, the man—the human being—is counted as overbalancing thousands of pounds. What, then, should

it be in the case of government, where the man is almost all, and the money little or nothing? Surely equality, and nothing less than equality—(cheers). And this was the grand basis on which the Birmingham Conference laid its proceedings—the basis of equal and immutable right—restricted, but restricted only to suit the circumstances of the times—and without placing any reliance on the peculiarity of the restriction beyond what it would be entitled to claim, as the wisest, the best, the most liberal, and the most unexceptionable that could be adopted—(cheers). Having laid down this grand principle, and adopted its most eligible practical application, the Conference proceeded to consider other arrangements that are necessary for giving it full effect. The first was the *Ballot*. On this point, I need not detain you long. The ballot was adopted by the Conference, not as a good thing in itself, but as a thing rendered necessary by the corruption and intimidation that prevail. The Conference declared that they thought every man should be able to go to the poll and give an open vote. This is my opinion; I think there should be nothing to prevent this, any more than there is at present to prevent a man from going to church or chapel, whichever he likes; but, seeing that such is not the case—that there are bribery, cajolery, and intimidation—the Conference agreed that, for a time at least, there should be the protection of the ballot—(cheers). The next point was Equal Electoral Districts; and this, I think, is one that requires little argument. If we affirm the principle that every member of society is to have an equal voice in the management of society's affairs, we must take care that a member in one place has not twice, thrice, or ten times the influence of a member in another. A glance at the anomalous and unjust state of things at present existing will be the best argument in favour of equal electoral districts. In England, there are twenty-three boroughs, some of them with only 150, and none of them with 500 electors, that return two members each. In these twenty-three boroughs, less than 8000 electors return 46 members; while the borough of Finsbury with 13,300, Westminster with 15,745, Lancashire with 17,754, and the western division of the county of York with 29,076 electors, return only two each. An elector in Thetford or Harwich possesses 80 times the political influence of an elector of Finsbury, 90 times that of an elector in Westminster, 100 times that of an elector in Lancashire, and 180 times the influence of an elector in west Yorkshire. In Scotland, we have similar anomalies; 177 electors in Sutherlandshire have the same influence as 3181 in Aberdeenshire. Glasgow, with 7520 electors, returns only two members; while Bute and Caithness, with only 800 electors between them, return two members. Is this fair? What superiority is there in the Bute and Caithness men, that they should each have eight times the influence of an Aberdeenshire man, and ten times the influence of an intelligent Glasgow

merchant or operative. A half-feudal serf of the Duke of Sutherland has fourteen times the political influence of our worthy chairman, and twenty times the influence of some of the ablest and wealthiest men in Glasgow—(cheers and laughter). Ireland is not much better. The borough of Lisburn, with 97 voters, returns a member; Dublin, with 7357, returns only two!—"Shame." It has been argued by the *Leeds Mercury*, and the argument has been adopted by some of our Whig friends, that equal electoral districts would be injurious to the Liberal party, that it would give a preponderance to the counties, and, consequently, to the Tories. My answer is that, if this were true, it would be no reason against doing justice; if the majority of the people are in favour of the Tories, let the Tories get the advantage of it—(cheers and laughter). But I do not believe that it is true; on the contrary, I am persuaded that it is through these twenty-three boroughs that I have referred to, and other small constituencies, that the Tories, the people's enemies, the enemies of liberty, by whatever name they may call themselves, get their ascendancy—(cheers). Moreover, if these distinctions between town and county constituencies were done away with, I believe that many of the petty and foolish jealousies that keep the people asunder would also come to an end—(cheers). It can never help the cause of liberty to have a large number of the members of Parliament returned through the money or the influence of the wealthy monopolist or the great landowner; yet this is all the good purpose that the small boroughs serve—(cheers). The next point adopted by the Birmingham Conference, was the abolition of Property Qualification for Members. On this I need not say much. An equal voice implies an equal choice, and an equal choice can only be had if property qualification be done away with for members as well as for voters. Besides, already we have got rid of the property qualification in Scotland, and I do not think that the members we return are worse on this account—(cheers). The Payment of Members follows next, and an exceedingly reasonable thing it seems to be. If, as we expect, all chance of payment from overpaid places, unmerited pensions, and improper monopolies, is put an end to, we must, if we really desire our work well done, give a salary to the man who undertakes it, otherwise, depend upon it, he will contrive some mode of paying himself—(cheers). Only one point remains—Annual Parliaments. On this there was considerable difference of opinion in the Conference. All agreed as to the necessity of thorough responsibility on the part of the member to his constituents, but some thought this might be effected in one way, and some in another; at last, it was resolved, by a majority of the Conference, that annual parliaments were a proper mode of securing this responsibility—(cheers). Thus, gentlemen, I have gone over the six points adopted by the Birmingham Conference, and endeavoured, to



the best of my ability, to explain to you the reasons by which I think they can, one and all, be supported. Their importance, however, I would beg to say, is not uniform. The grand principle is the equal right of every member of society to a voice in the management of the affairs of society; and the most eligible practical application of this principle is male adult suffrage. To carry it out, equal electoral districts, no property qualification for members, and a short duration of parliament, are considered essential; and less essential, but still expedient, the ballot, and payment of members of parliament—(cheers). Let me now, for a few minutes, direct your attention to some objections that are made to the proceedings of the Birmingham Conference. The first is a very trifling one, and it is urged with equal lack of reason by two parties. Our timid middle-class friends complain that we have adopted all the points of the Charter, and our extreme Chartist friends grumble because we will not call ourselves Chartists—(laughter). Now, to the first I would say, if the points be good and true, as I have tried to show them to be, why should you care where they come from; and to the second, if we have agreed to the things that you think right, why should you be so silly as cavil because, for some reason, good or bad, we do not adopt a particular name. But, as prejudice will sometimes be obstinate, it may, perhaps, reconcile both parties a little to put them in mind of some facts, that, in their eagerness to avoid or impose a name, they seem altogether to have forgotten. Be it known, then, that the six points agreed to at Birmingham, were adopted by Reformers nearly 60 years before ever the Charter was heard of, and many years before nine-tenths of the Chartists were born. In 1776, Major Cartwright published a pamphlet, pointing out the necessity of Parliamentary Reform. In 1780, a great public meeting of the inhabitants of Westminster was held for the purpose of promoting Parliamentary reform. At this meeting, a committee was appointed, which agreed to a report, recommending

1. Annual Parliaments.
2. Universal Suffrage.
3. Voting by Ballot
4. Equal Polling Districts.
5. No Money Qualifications for Members.
6. Payment of Members.

This report was immediately adopted by the Society for Constitutional Information, at the head of which was

The Duke of Richmond, President.

(I wish his son were of the same way of thinking.)

The Earl of Derby.	The Earl of Selkirk.
The Earl of Effingham.	Viscount Mountmaurice.
The Earl of Surrey.	Lord Kinnaird.

Now, it may, perhaps, please some of our middle-class friends to know that the principles adopted at Birming-



ham did not take their origin in the Charter (although, if they had, they would have had a most respectable parentage), but were ushered into the world under the auspices of dukes, earls, viscounts, and lords—(cheers). And when our Chartist friends reflect that these points were promulgated so long before the Charter was heard of, they may possibly come to the conclusion that they have no right to insist that everybody who adopts them shall call himself a Chartist—(cheers). This information, relative to former movements in behalf of reform, I give you as it is detailed in an excellent tract published by the Metropolitan and Parliamentary Reform Association, but the facts can be attested by many old Reformers still alive, some of whom I have the honour of calling my friends—(cheers). The Metropolitan Association have resumed all these six points, with a little alteration on the annual parliaments one, and yet they do not call themselves Chartists. Are they the worse Reformers for that, or is there a reasonable Chartist that would object to them or obstruct them on that account? Another objection to the principles of the Birmingham Conference, but which is urged only by one class, is, that an extension of the franchise would only extend the field of bribery. My answer to this is, that the first effect of the extension of the franchise to every adult male, would be to put an end to the abuses that form the chief temptation to bribe. Do you believe that, if the corn-laws and other monopolies had been repealed before last election, the Carlton Club, or, in other words, the Tory aristocracy, would have thought it worth their while to expend nearly a million of money in securing a majority in the House of Commons? Depend upon it they would not. But it is said, "Oh, there will always be bribery, even if you render it more expensive, by increasing the number of voters; and, less profitable, by decreasing the chance of a return for the money." I do not believe it—I do not think that there will be bribing without a motive; but, if I am mistaken, if there must be bribery, why, in the name of fair play, I say let all get a share of it—give it to the poor who need money, as well as to the ten-pounders who are not in want—(cheers and laughter). There is another objection, however, which, although not better grounded than either of the preceding, is of a more serious character, and merits a graver answer. It has been said that, if you give the working classes political power, they will use it for purposes of spoliation and robbery. Mr. Macaulay in the House of Commons, and many timid Tories and Whigs out of it, have drawn horrible pictures of the state of anarchy and confusion that would flow from universal suffrage. But I feel persuaded that, if they really believe what they say, they are utterly mistaken. What motive have the working classes to rob those above them; and how are they to do it if they are so disposed? I can easily see how ten people could hope for permanent benefit from robbing a thou-

sand, if they had the power ; but I cannot see how the thousand could expect any lasting gain from a robbery of the ten—(cheers). The few may have an interest in robbing the many, but the many can have little interest in robbing the few—(cheers). The millions might calculate on some tenpenny-halfpenny gain from seizing on the jewels of the Queen and the Duchess of Sutherland, so ostentatiously talked of amidst general national distress ; but the advantage would be temporary, and counterbalanced in the mind of nine-tenths of the working population by the shock that would be given to the security of property. I do not believe, from all that I have seen of the working classes, that they have the slightest intention to interfere with the sacred right of property. What is their wish ? Do they not hope each to gain something, and does not each desire earnestly that the fruits of his industry should be preserved to him ?—(cheers.) Their complaint is that property is not respected at present—(cheers). By unjust laws, their little earnings are frittered away to support a bad system of policy, which does not enrich even the few to the extent that it impoverishes the many—(cheers). Talk of security to property ! Where is it ? I was in my native town of Paisley the other day, and I saw men who, a few years ago, were worth thousands, reduced to beggary—I saw men who had talents, industry, and perseverance, equal to what is possessed by any one here, who could hardly provide wherewithal to keep their families from starving—(hear, hear). The distress of that town has not been exaggerated ; and it is a fact that those on the relief list are not the worst off. The men who have been accustomed to go with good coats on their backs—the foremen, the clerks and petty managers who have been thrown out of employment, who have sold or pawned every article of furniture or clothing that could be spared, till they are obliged to appear in a dress that would disgrace a broken-down sheriff-officer, and who are now on the brink of starvation, and yet ashamed to go to a meal-store or a soup-kitchen—are more to be pitied than some of the parties who have all along been counted among the destitute—(hear, hear). Where is these men's property ? Some of them were rich—all of them were comfortable—a few years ago ; and what are they now ? And yet we have not had universal suffrage. No ; nor one of the points of the Charter—(cheers). Protection to property, forsooth ! Need we wonder that these Paisley men—and there will soon be others in similar circumstances—should have little fear of the effect of universal suffrage ? Then how are the working-classes to set about robbing the wealthy ? If they are to do it by illegal means, are they not as well able to do it now as they will be after their enfranchisement !—and are they not more likely to have the necessary provocation ?—(cheers.) If they are to do it legally, it must be by a slow and considerate process—one that will expose

their designs to the public, cause them to be canvassed in all their bearings, and rouse a feeling of indignation against them. As I have said, I do not believe that the working-classes have any such object in view. I do not believe that they will seek to retaliate for the injuries they have suffered from the corn-laws and other monopolies—(cheers); but, if they were to do so, I can easily imagine them pointing for precedent, not to the proceedings of any revolutionary body, but to the deliberate acts of a Conservative Premier and a Conservative Parliament. When they want to confiscate the property of the rich—to seize money wherever it can be got, without regard to justice—they have only to point to the income tax—(cheers). When they want to sponge the debt, they have only to say, Sir Robert Peel compounded for 19s. 5d. in the pound—we choose to compound for the 7d.—(cheers). But to support the allegation that the working-classes would spoil and rob if they were invested with the franchise, reference has been made to the National Petition—presented, the other day, in the House of Commons—which, it is said, contains exceedingly dangerous doctrines. Now, I do not think, Mr. Chairman, that the National Petition has either been generously treated by its opponents, or fairly defended by its friends. I am not prepared to say that its composition is excellent; in many points, it is clumsily and stupidly enough worded. But we all know the difficulty of drawing up formal documents; and, if William Cobbett was able to find so many flaws in kings' speeches, and the standard writings of celebrated authors, we need not wonder that regular critics of the *Edinburgh* or *Westminster Review* should see blunders in a declaration by the unenfranchised. Neither am I going to stand up for all the doctrines that may be current among the authors and subscribers of the National Petition. There is, I doubt not, as bad political economy among the working classes as there is among the upper and middle classes of society—the difference being that the former have not yet had an opportunity of trying their hand at practical blundering, and that the latter have blundered too long—(cheers). But, in reference to this petition, the substance of it, or rather of the clause that has given rise to so much clamour, I do not find that it contains anything to excite alarm. Why, let us see. It talks of a monopoly of the suffrage. We are met to denounce that; and yet we are not spoliators. “The monopoly of paper-money.” Thousands of good men and eminent political economists have declaimed against the monopoly enjoyed by the Bank of England, and even against the banking system generally, and yet they were not called spoliators—(cheers). “The monopoly of machinery.” I confess I cannot understand what this means, but probably—and we are bound to give a liberal interpretation—it has some bearing on the scope and extent of the Factory Acts—(cheers). “The monopoly of land.” Have

we ever heard the people who argued against the laws of entail and primogeniture called spoliators—(cheers). “The monopoly of the public press.” It has been common with Radicals and friends of education to denounce the stamp on newspapers, and the stringent regulations as to securities. I do not say whether they are right or wrong—whether the stamp is not compensated for by the free transmission by the post—but I do say that a man who disapproves of the stamp and present stringent regulations for newspapers is entitled to speak of the monopoly of the public press, without being considered a spoliator. “The monopoly of religious principles.” This is a clumsy phrase; but its obvious meaning is the endowments and other *secular* privileges enjoyed by the Established Churches. Does any body call the Voluntaries spoliators?—(cheers.) “The monopoly of the means of travelling and transit.” It is surely possible for a body of men to complain of the enormous power given to railway companies without being called robbers and spoliators—(cheers). In fact this dreadful clause in the National Petition, if fairly examined and liberally interpreted, gives no ground whatever for the outcry that has been raised against that portion of the working classes who are claiming their political rights. But very little serves the purpose of men who are anxiously seeking a reason for refusing what they feel they ought to concede—(cheers). Having thus detailed the leading points in the proceedings of the Birmingham Conference, and endeavoured to show that there would be no danger in carrying out the great principle it adopted, I may be allowed now to say one word as to the means by which it proposes to work. It does not intend to interfere with any other agitation. It will accept the help of all. It will give tickets to all who approve of its objects, whatever they may call themselves; but it does not ask any one to separate himself from any organized body of Reformers to which he may heretofore have belonged. In the spirit of peace and toleration—an utter repudiation of everything like force—and an indulgent allowance for variety of opinion, it will go forward to secure that change in our political institutions which its members believe to be necessary for the political and social regeneration of the country.



