

SPEECH OF SIR FRANCIS BURDETT, BART.

THIS MORNING,

AT THE HUSTINGS, IN COVENT GARDEN.

GENTLEMEN,

I never presented myself to the electors of Westminster on any occasion with more satisfaction than that which I now feel in meeting them, when they are called together to decide what are the great constitutional principles to which they will attach themselves in the new circumstances which have recently sprung up around us. It is a matter of satisfaction to me, as it must be to all of you who now hear me, that we live under a form of government which enables us to assemble together on great and important occasions, and to make known and express to each other our mutual opinions. We may be mistaken on many points, perhaps we are as to one another, but we all, as true Englishmen, keep those opinions of our own which we think right for the public good, as we judge of it, and which we, standing as candidates for the suffrages of the electors, are in duty bound unambiguously to declare. It is of little importance what the names of the candidates are, or how long or how short their standing may be in the eye of the public when they offer themselves to your notice; because this, I maintain, is not a question of personal contest between individuals; but the question which you have to decide is this,—are the electors of Westminster the determined friends of the Constitution of England as it is now established, or are they in favour of further changes? Will they give their votes to those who advocate those changes? Are they for those further changes which, as I conceive, will tend very much to impair that Constitution, and some of which, as proposed, will, in fact, of themselves subvert it? Gentlemen, it cannot be expected of me that I should advert—indeed I should be scarcely worthy of your notice if I did advert—to all the various aspersions which have lately been thrown upon me, not from any malevolent motive, as I believe, but from the sincere, though I think mistaken conviction, that I have changed my sentiments, opinions, and principles. An hon. gentleman now present, and near me, who has expressed his high opinion of me in former times, and who now also expresses his regard for me, wrote me a letter wishing me to answer a particular question, and to explain my sentiments as to the particular side which I may take on a particular occasion. It is quite impossible for me to give any answer to a question of that description, put under such circumstances, because, from its very nature, it involves another question, namely, whether I am willing, in this year, 1837, to propose annual Parliaments, universal suffrage, and vote by ballot, as I proposed them in 1818. Now, I am not ashamed to say that I abandoned my plan for that which has since been adopted, because I found that many would agree to that plan whose consent it would be impossible to obtain to that which I proposed. I will not, therefore, bring in or support any new plan of reform, as that which is now adopted met the wishes of the greatest number [of Reformers, and as there were many Reformers who would not have agreed to any other. In the mutual concessions which were then made, there was one exception from the compromise to which all classes of Reformers came—and that was the vote by ballot. I never had any objection to the vote by ballot; but, considering the grievances which remain yet undressed, I should be greatly deceiving the people of England, and acting unjustly to my own character, if I were to say that I believed the ballot would prove a specific for every or any one of those grievances. I certainly can feel no objection to the ballot, though I think that the Reform Bill which has passed has rendered it now a matter of minor importance. I have been accused of inconsistency, because I am not willing to do at one time what, under different circumstances, I thought expedient at another; but, I consider myself precluded, by the passing of the Reform Bill, from making any alteration in our elective system, save that which I have already excepted. There was another plan of Reform proposed many years ago, which I thought better than that proposed in the late Reform Bill, and I see no inconsistency in my now being opposed to those theories and propositions, which the passing of that bill has rendered unnecessary. I am, I have always been a Reformer. I supported Mr. Grey's plan of reform in 1793, which I think was better than that since adopted; but was I therefore inconsistent because I waved some minor objections and supported the Reform Bill? There is no moral turpitude in the inconsistency of opinions at different times, provided that a man always acts up to what he honestly believes to be correct. The moral turpitude is not in the change of opinion, but in the change of opinion arising from corrupt motives. If self-interest can be shown, then it will be a reproach to a man, and it will be more than a suspicious circumstance attaching to his character. I defy any man living to say that any act of mine, in the course of my long public life, has been tinged with any interested feeling of any

description. (Cheers.) I have always considered the public good—I have always looked to the wants and wishes of the people of England,—to consult them has been my leading and great principle of action. Such shall continue to be my principle of action. Good practical measures the people of England must look to, more particularly the working classes of the people of England, whose condition, if it is possible at all to review, mend, remedy, or alleviate, I shall, I need not say, not be backward—I shall be the first to do all in my power to promote that most desirable object. (Cheers.) Gentlemen, that is the noblest principle that can actuate any public man. It ought to be the first view of every Government to better the condition of the lower classes of society. It is the most important in my mind—it should be the paramount object which every Government should have in view. (Cheers.) With respect to the new propositions that have been recently broached, I am against them all, because I think them all mischievous and essentially dangerous to the liberties of the people. (Cheers.) I don't at all approve of the changes or alterations that are making, or proposed to be made, with respect to the Church. I don't believe they will conduce to the good, the advantage of the people. The wealth of the established church excites the envy of many—shallow principles of false economy perhaps influence others; some on one ground, others on another, may advocate those changes, but I maintain that the property of the church is a property belonging to the people, from which the poorest man in England may derive the advantages of religious instruction (cheers), and by which the son of a pauper, by getting on some of our noble and benevolent foundations, may receive as good an education as the son of a Peer, and ultimately place himself by the side of the nobles of the land. Those changes, in my opinion, would tend to alienate and destroy that property which belongs to the people, and will deduct from their chance of advancement in life those resources which can never again be supplied. (Cheers.) Gentlemen, there were several other measures alluded to by the gentleman who seconded me, and to which I should also have wished to refer. There is, for instance, the Poor Law Amendment Act. I opposed the introduction of that measure, and I did it on the ground that I thought it in principle unconstitutional and likely to be an instrument of oppression. I opposed that bill, but at the same time I did not accuse those who introduced and supported it of anything like intended cruelty towards the poor, although I think the regulations of that law are totally incompatible not only with the well-being, but with the good feelings of the poor, which ought to be consulted as well as their happiness itself. I thought that in every parish throughout the kingdom it was desirable that a great change should take place in the administration of the poor-rates, but I did think that no one good object could be effected by the cumbersome and expensive machinery of the Poor Law Amendment Act. (Cheers.) Quite unconstitutional in its original principles, the objects it had in view might have been much better effected in a safe way by constitutional means, and by processes to which the people of this country are accustomed, which are much more congenial with their feelings, and consequently more favourable to their happiness. (Cheers.) I had not the good fortune to hear any of the observations made by those who proposed my hon. opponent, and I am not willing at this time of day, and in the present inclement state of the weather, to enter on matters where, indeed, no discussion can take place, and especially as I am not aware that any opinion of mine requires to be reiterated. I have read a great deal of matter extracted from speeches made by me, or said to have been made by me, in different newspapers a great number of years since, and which prove no more than this—that I was then, as I now am, a firm friend and determined supporter of the English Constitution, the whole Constitution, and nothing but the Constitution. (Loud cheers.) There I take my stand. Call me Conservative if you please, I am not for destroying any part of the constitution of my country. I don't care whether I am called Whig or Tory; I am for the Constitution of England, and I think the most stupid of all expedients is to revive now the old watch-words of Whig and Tory. I am free to confess that the Reform Bill has not so far met the fond anticipations which I had formed respecting it, for I really had the simplicity to think, that when that bill passed, honest and able men, whether nominally distinguished as Whigs or Tories, would have stood upon that as a broad foundation, and applied their talents, abilities, and integrity, for the good of the public at large. (Cheers.) I had no idea that narrow bigotry would have been enlisted against me on this occasion after I had fought as I did the great battle of reform. (Cheers.) I am really not aware

what I ought further to address myself to, but there are three words which have been quoted against me in the *Morning Chronicle*, as having formed part of a speech delivered by me a considerable time ago, for the purpose of proving that I have abandoned my former principles. Now, I must say, I have not been in the habit of correcting the reports of my speeches, and therefore, after all, you must only take it as the speech of the reporter; and the passage which I am now going to quote has literally no credibility annexed to it at all. The few words which have been attributed to me, and which I am certain are not correct, are these—that I was favourable to a "reform of the House of Lords." Gentlemen, such a thing never was dreamt of at the time they were supposed to be uttered, and, therefore, I never could have said anything of the kind; but if I had said so, I think them very foolish and absurd words, and I would not give countenance to them now. (Cheers.) The House of Lords has constitutional powers, which are as absolutely necessary as those of the other branch of the Legislature to the support of this great and glorious constitution, consisting of an amalgamation of different powers, balancing, checking, and controlling the exorbitant preponderance of each other, and under which we have enjoyed, and still maintain, the fullest liberty, the greatest independence of mind, the greatest tolerance in religion, the greatest freedom and energy of exertion and industry, accompanied with more productive reward than ever before existed in any nation on the face of the earth. I am not willing, therefore, according to the fancies of some theorists, to change the admirable form of government under which we live into a democracy, such as is established in a great part of the American Continent (cheers); I am standing on the ground of the English Constitution (renewed cheers), on which I have always taken my stand. There I still stand, with a mind convinced only by experience and observation. (Continued cheers.) My hon. opponent stands here, I should say, a very practical proof of the beneficial results of the Constitution of this country. That gentleman is, as I understand, the son of a tradesman who made a large fortune. Now, there is no other country in the world where tradesmen can make such fortunes, and where the sons of tradesmen can procure such an education as may enable them to stand forward as this young gentleman does—sturdily and properly stand forward, in defence of these fundamental principles which he has been taught to believe, and which no doubt he does believe, to be true. (Cheers.) I must say, however, that I do not see how it is possible for the friends of the present Administration to support a gentleman who professes such principles as my opponent holds. What, then, is the result of the state of this country? Such instances as that to which I have referred are occurring daily, within your own observation (hear, hear), and some of the greatest men now living have been raised to the highest situations from the most humble origins, filling those great offices with credit and honour to themselves. I ask you whether, looking to the state of society, resulting from the forms of government established in every other country but our own, the same splendid success could have crowned their exertions? (Cheers.) The Lord Chancellor Eldon and his brother, Lord Stowell, were examples of this, and some of the most eminent lawyers of our own time, bred up at a grammar-school, attending at Oxford on charitable foundations, have ascended through all the gradations of rank in society up to the highest which a subject of the British Crown can hope to fill. (Loud and continued cheering.) Is this a state of things, proving as it does the most enlightened civilization to which a country has yet attained, which the people of England, giving ear to crude fallacies, led away by rash and hasty notions, should be willing to change? (Vehement cries of "No.") I know that there are some men foolish enough to entertain such a wish; but of these, however, I am not one. (Cheers.) I can only tell them that I will not consent to embark on an ocean of change to which I can see no limit; and that I will never advocate projects which I cannot convince myself will tend to increase the prosperity, the peace, the happiness of my countrymen. (Tremendous cheering, mingled with groans and interruptions from the party of Mr. Leader, pertinaciously continued for many minutes.) I need not exhaust myself, said the Hon. Baronet, by talking to a multitude, hardly a dozen of whom, I find, are allowed to hear me. (Renewed groans from the Radicals.) I am not for that policy which would subvert the State, and therefore those who on this occasion poll for me will poll for the maintenance of the constitution of England. I have not deserted my post or my principles; I have, to the utmost of my power, done my duty to my country, and it is for you to decide how I am to be rewarded for it. (Loud cheering.) I have already said that to me, as a personal matter, that decision can be nothing; I have no more personal interest in the result of this contest than I had in the result of any other in which I have ever been engaged. On this footing I put the contest: the individual member is nothing at all; it is a battle for the constitution and institutions of England; and it is to be seen whether the citizens of Westminster will or will not give the constitution that support which, if any encroachment were through their neglect made upon it, I am persuaded they would, after a brief space, discovering their delusion, bitterly regret that they had withheld from it. (Loud and long shouts of applause.)

