

II.—*The Brussels Free Trade Congress and International Association for Customs Reform.*—By Henry Dix Hutton, Esq.

[Read November 17th, 1856.]

THE modern world tends increasingly to recognize at once the just independence of the individual, and the duty of social co-operation. In its application to the great sphere of international interests, this principle involves the most important consequences. It has two aspects; on the one hand, teaching the inviolability of national existence, and the duty of defending the weak against the encroachments or menaces of the strong; on the other, sanctioning and encouraging the voluntary association of the citizens of all countries, as fellow workers in the common interests of social progress and humanity. The operation of the former of these is especially political, though it is evident that the more entirely we recognize the just independence of our neighbours, the more willingly they should pay respect to our counsels; but that of the latter is peculiarly moral and intellectual, seeking to change for the better our ideas, our feelings, and our habits, as the necessary groundwork for all radical and permanent ameliorations in our institutions, and endeavouring by all peaceful and rational means to introduce greater unity into the thoughts, harmony into the sentiments, and union into the actions of the European public.

The "Free Trade Congress" held in Brussels during three days in the month of September last, belonged to this latter class of influences, and manifested their growth and increasing power to a very remarkable degree. It was the successor of a Congress also held at Brussels in the year 1847; the object of which was to lay the bases for future action, by broadly asserting the great principles of Commercial Liberty, then recently applied in England for the first time on a large scale. That assembly, which numbered somewhat less than 200 members, chiefly, too, theorists by profession, expressed its conviction that commercial liberty was a necessity of human society and would have the effect:—

Firstly, of drawing closer the various nations, who, far from becoming tributary, would lend each other a mutual support.

Secondly, of extending production and of protecting industry from those violent fluctuations which are inevitable in the limited markets incident to the protectionist system.

Thirdly, of ameliorating the lot of the operatives, and,

Fourthly, of destroying a constant source of demoralization.

These were the principal results of the Congress of Economists held in 1847, which originated from the Belgian Free Trade Association, founded by Monsieur Charles de Brouckere, now the Burgomaster of Brussels, and who was the president both of the Congress of 1847 and of that of 1856. The spread of liberal views, combined with the impulse imparted by the growing extension of commercial relations, the expansion of credit, and the increasing unity of European civilization fostered by steam communication and the telegraph, and rendered visible in the exhibitions of 1851 and

1855,—all these influences working together gradually prepared the way for a further and even more decided step in advance. This was taken by Monsieur Corr Vander Maeren in November, 1855, when he proposed, in a meeting of the Belgian "Political Economy Society," the formation of an "Association for Customs Reform;" which was shortly after carried out, the central committee being established at Brussels, under the presidency of M. Vander Maeren, with corresponding branch-societies which have since arisen in most of the principal seats of provincial industry throughout Belgium. To ensure the success of such an Association it was necessary not only that it should rest on a great principle, but that its objects should be definite, practicable, and opportune. The new society therefore proposed to itself three principal reforms, as being those which, with reference to Belgium, are both most needed and most feasible, namely:—

First, the total and immediate abolition of the duties upon articles of prime necessity for manufactures, and especially upon bar iron, castings, and coals.

Second, the reduction of the duties on manufactured articles to ad valorem imposts not exceeding ten per cent. allowing, however, in certain cases, exceptionally and provisionally, higher rates in favor of a few existing and now protected branches of industry.

Third, the simplification of the existing complicated tariff. These propositions were submitted to the various Chambers of Commerce throughout Belgium, and met with very general assent, even in the centres of protected branches of industry. Vervier, in particular, the seat of great manufactories of woollen fabrics now protected, pronounced strongly in favour of the movement; and not only was its Chamber of Commerce represented by its president and other members at the Congress of 1856, but one hundred and eighty individual adhesions were given in to principles of commercial liberty, these coming mostly from the heads of the protected interests.

While, however, the objects thus proposed by the Belgian Association seem to me well conceived, as they have been ably and energetically advocated, by M. Vander Maeren and his coadjutors, I take the liberty of observing that the general enunciation of its programme appears in one respect to be at variance with sound economical principle, and calculated to foster an illusion capable of producing very bad effects in practice. I refer to that portion of it which professes to advocate "the transformation of the existing *protective* tariff into a purely *fiscal* tariff." Now I submit that this view involves a practical self-contradiction, for if we consider that there is a competition between home manufactured articles and foreign importations, not only as regards those things which are identical in both cases, but in respect of equivalents of consumption (as for example, between malt liquors and tea or coffee), we shall see that, for this and other reasons, it is very rarely if ever the case that custom duties, though imposed only with a view to raise a revenue, are not *in fact* protective to a greater or less degree. There are, therefore, I believe, but two courses open to commercial reformers; namely, either, first, to propose the *abolition* of all custom and excise duties, *replacing* them by others—in other words,

to advocate the substitution of direct for indirect taxation; or, secondly, to advocate the *progressive reform* of the existing unjust and complicated tariffs, by repealing those protective duties which oppress industry and the consumers most. The former course presents an ideal which is, I think, high and true as an ultimate aim, and one to which every partial reform brings us nearer; but it is not at present practicable, at least not on the Continent; and practical men therefore do wisely to avoid creating needless alarm and exciting the multitude of hostile interests that bureaucratic government creates in favour of a system which multiplies places almost at pleasure. The latter object therefore alone is properly sought by the Belgian Association; but we, who have witnessed the progress of a similar agitation in our own country, will, I believe, agree with Monsieur Faider, who said at the Congress, that fiscal taxation was the rock under which lurked the viper of protection; and I am sorry to say that this little protectionist animal showed his head with considerable courage and vigor on several occasions, notwithstanding the hard blows which were directed against it. It is therefore of great importance to distinguish between conciliation and compromise; between the spirit of temperate progress, and that which obtains temporary but illusory relief at the expense of real and ultimate defeat.

The success which attended the efforts of the new association, naturally led to a proposition for a second Congress, to be called a Congress for Customs Reform; and a circular to that effect was widely circulated. The result was, that upwards of 700 persons sent in their names as members, of which number between 300 and 400 were actually present. The majority of these were practical men, themselves engaged in the various departments of industry. Four Governments, namely, Spain, Sardinia, Switzerland, and Saxony, sent official delegates to advocate the cause of free-trade. England also, and Ireland, from many of their Chambers of Commerce sent delegates, as also did the same bodies and various societies in France, Germany, Italy, Holland, and the other countries above mentioned. In addition to these official representatives, there came a great number of adherent members, attracted by their interest in the cause of commercial liberty.

Two questions were proposed to the members for their consideration by the central committee of the Association for Customs Reforms, namely;—First, what are the obstacles, either natural or artificial, which impede the extension of the commercial relations of the nation you represent?—Second, what are the practical means proposed or capable of being proposed in order to destroy or diminish, in each country, the effects of these obstacles to international commerce? Members were also invited to bring written or printed statements setting forth their views on these points, and also to present to the Congress any documents which might tend to illustrate them. Of these last, a great number were furnished; and in addition to them much that was interesting and important, as tending to show both the progress already made towards the application of free-trade principles, and the means of further advancing their practical ascendancy, was brought forward during the sittings

of the Congress, which lasted four days. These will be published either entirely or in a condensed form, and on a future occasion I may ask permission to state some of the particular results thus obtained; but the object of the present paper is to indicate the chief general results accomplished by the Congress, and the means proposed by it for the attainment of commercial liberty throughout Europe.

The real object of such a gathering of men from all countries is not, I think, that of *discussing* principles or even their applications. It consists rather in *stating* clearly, succinctly, and decidedly those propositions which either resume past progress, or are destined to promote further advances. Views thus expressed carry great weight, not so much by reason of any demonstration of their truths obtained through discussion, as because they emanate from practical men, whose convictions, founded on long previous observation and reflexion, necessarily exercise a deep influence over public opinion.

Such appears to have been the idea of the framers of the Congress, for the real business of the meeting was transacted in the committees, which met each morning before the public sittings. These were, first, the Committee of Legislation; second, the Committee of Statistics; and third, the Committee of Propositions, through which last all proposed resolutions were obliged to pass and to receive its sanction before they could be submitted to the Congress. Each member attended the Committee which he thought fit to select. *In fact* there were but two committees, for those of Legislation and of Propositions coalesced. It would seem to me that on a future occasion it might be a preferable arrangement to have but the two, namely, one called the Committee of Industry, designed to consider the effects of commercial liberty on industrial enterprise, and possessing the power of appointing sub-committees if deemed necessary, with reference to each of the four great branches of industry, viz. Agriculture, Manufactures, Commerce, and Banking; and another committee called that of Propositions. The term "Statistics" appears to me, I confess, objectionable, as being foreign to the main objects of such a Congress and as fostering the illusory notion that there exists an abstract science of statistics.

The practical effect of these committees was excellent, for they generalized and reduced to a convenient shape the multitude of propositions submitted by individual members; and besides this, they gave a preliminary but important sanction to some views which the general assembly of the Congress were not fully prepared to adopt in the categorical form in which they were proposed to it.

These propositions, which were submitted to, and subsequently in substance ratified by the Congress, may be classed under three heads, according as they related either, First, to ideas respecting commercial liberty which were deemed ripe for immediate application; Second, to the means for accomplishing their realization; or Third, to views adopted in principle, but which called for further consideration as to the mode of carrying them out. I shall now shortly indicate the resolutions thus passed by the Congress. I have placed them in their final shape in an appendix, where they will be printed more fully than our time permits me to read them now.

To the first class belong;

Firstly, a resolution in favor of the abolition of all that remains of what is known as the colonial system.

Secondly, a resolution in favor of the unimpeded navigation of rivers and straits, freed from all tolls.

Thirdly, a resolution in favor of dispensing with all fees on passports and visas for each country entered.

Fourthly, a resolution in favor of the simplification of the formalities required in declarations respecting goods destined for importation, exportation, or transit.

Fifthly, a resolution in favor of popularizing Political Economy, and making it a part of public instruction both in universities and in primary schools.

Sixthly, a resolution in favor of a definitive and permanent free-trade in alimentary substances.

Seventhly, a resolution in favor of a great reduction of the duties on wines, especially in England, where these are practically almost prohibitive.

Eighthly, a resolution in favor of abolishing, as rapidly as possible, duties on the importation of the raw materials of manufactures, such as combustibles and iron.

Ninthly, a resolution calling for a general reform in the customs system throughout Europe, as a thing required by the interests of nations, of the operatives, of the protected interests themselves, and of governments; and condemning prohibitive duties, domiciliary or personal visits, bounties on exports, and the system of reprisals.

Tenthly, a resolution in favor of simplifying and rendering uniform the customs tariffs of Europe.

Secondly, as the most efficient means of carrying out these views and continuing the work of the Congress, M. Corr Vander Maeren proposed and the general assembly decided upon *the foundation of an International Association for obtaining commercial liberty*. The statutes of this body, which there is every reason to hope will work well and produce excellent results, will be found in the appendix to this paper; I will only say here that the new association consists of a central committee in Belgium, of which M. Vander Maeren is the president, and corresponding committees under the leadership of some one eminent free trader for each country; Mr. Cobden being named for England, and having accepted this office. The Association proposes to publish an annual report relating to its proceedings, and showing the progressive state of the Free Trade question. This report will be sent to all subscribers of the sum of ten shillings.

Thirdly, a proposition was sanctioned by the Committee of Propositions in favor of the general establishment of Commercial Courts, and Chambers of Commerce. This the Congress referred to the new International Association. Another proposition similarly sanctioned, and advocating the uniformity of weights, measures, and coins; of international postage for letters and books; of the charges for telegraphic messages; of commercial documents; and generally of everything that concerns international commerce, was likewise referred to the new Association, conjointly with the so-

cieties already established in Paris and London, for pursuing these objects or some of them.

Lastly, the members of the Congress, each with reference to his own country, were invited to consider in what manner the existing octroi duties could be best replaced, and other means found for paying the commercial expenses.

Such were the resolutions of this remarkable assembly, the effects of which are already beginning to make themselves felt. From a recent circular of the Belgian Association for Customs Reform, I learn that in the meeting held on the 3rd of this month, by the Belgian Agricultural Society, it rejected a proposition relative to the prohibition of the export of bones,—one of those measures by way of reprisal, to which men injured by a protectionist system are sometimes disposed unwisely to resort; while this society, on the same occasion, adopted by a large majority the proposition made to it by M. Corr Vander Maeren, for instituting a searching examination into the existing Belgian tariff, as affecting agricultural interests.

In conclusion, I beg to call your attention to some of the *general social results* which naturally flow from such meetings of practical men, thus brought together from time to time as opportunity requires, for the promotion of definite reforms urgently demanded by the best interests of society.

They must be reckoned, I think, among the most powerful agencies in that education of the industrial classes, and especially of their chiefs and leaders, which is essential in order that they may vindicate for the industrial system, and for themselves as its representatives, the social position and influence which its interests and duties alike demand. As distinguished from mere instruction, this education consists, I think, in the gradual development of larger views and awakening of more elevated feelings of duty, justice, and generosity towards those who are dependent on the capitalist, and whose destinies are linked with his. Many incidents of the Congress showed how capable the practical industrialist is fast becoming, of adding to the reality which is the foundation of all true conceptions, the generality of thought that gives them consistency and force, and almost necessarily draws to it a higher and more expansive tone of feeling. This was manifested in the general condemnation of the system of reprisals, in the solicitude exhibited for the welfare of the operatives, so seriously affected by the protective tariffs now in force, and in the marked approbation given to those speakers who, in many instances, set forth with great impartiality the defects of their respective countries, and even corrected the omissions or errors of previous statements made in relation to them. The general feeling of the audience was manifestly opposed to the inconsistencies into which several professed free-traders were betrayed, either by ignorance or supposed self-interest. Thus when one gentleman from Prussia proposed that the free Hanse Towns should unite with the German Zoll Verein, M. Hartwig Hertz happily observed that the Zoll Verein would do better to associate itself with the commercial liberty of the Hanse Towns; and in reply to another speaker who advocated the giving of a bounty on

the exportation of ardent spirits, in favor of the agricultural interests, the president, M. de Brouckere, remarked with equal felicity, that to do so would be to grant a premium upon poisoning our neighbours.

It is not necessary to dwell upon the benefits which must also result from the concentration of the efforts of distinct nations in the prosecution of objects involving the common interests of all; or upon the tendency which such co-operation must have to eliminate the jarring elements of traditional prejudice and national animosity, replacing these remains of a barbarous and retrograde system by conceptions which will gradually consolidate European peace, placing it under the protection of a strong, enlightened, and united public opinion. These are the noble objects for which the new "International Association for Customs Reform" is now working, and by virtue of which it claims the sympathy and aid of all who wish well to the cause of commercial liberty, and desire to substitute for a system which has been justly designated a state of industrial feudalism, one which, adopting mutual amity as its principle, and resting upon the invariable laws of social order, must result in the true welfare and progress of nations.

APPENDIX.

The Resolutions passed by the Congress for Customs Reforms, held at Brussels in 1856.

First, "The Congress founds an International Association for realizing Commercial Liberty."

M. Corr Vander Maeren, at the last sitting of the Congress, submitted the following articles agreed upon that morning by the members of the new Association then present in Brussels, and which were ratified by the Congress as constituting the fundamental statutes of the International Association, viz.

Art. 1. An International Association for Customs Reforms is founded. This Association will endeavour, by uniting the scattered forces of all countries, to effect a progressive reform in the existing tariffs, to hasten by all legal means in every country the spread of the principles of commercial liberty, and in short to continue the work commenced by the Congress.

Art. 2. The central committee will sit at Brussels.

Art. 3. The members of the Association are charged with the formation of corresponding committees for each state.

Art. 4. The Brussels Committee is charged with the duty of collecting documents, uniting the efforts of the branch committees, and thus enlightening public opinion through the co-operation of the members of the Association. To the central committee is confided the duty of determining the time and place of a future Congress. It will also address an annual report to every member of the Association.

Art. 5. An International fund will be created, in order to provide for the expenses of the Association; and the annual subscription of each member is fixed at ten shillings, exclusive of voluntary donations.

Second, "The Congress expresses its desire for the abolition of all that remains of the colonial system."

This resolution was in substance, but with more detail, proposed by the Antwerp Chamber of Commerce, but the above succinct and generalized form was due to Mr. Hartwig Hertz.

Third, "The Congress expresses the wish that the navigation of rivers forming the channels of international communication may be freed from all obstacles, and that all dues of transit levied in respect of such rivers and straits may be abolished."

Fourth, "The Congress expresses the wish that the passport-laws may be modified so as to secure the free circulation of travellers without any fiscal tax, or any previous visa for the various countries."

Fifth, "The Congress expresses the wish that all declarations relative to goods intended for export, import, and transit may be rendered as simple and uniform as possible."

Sixth, "The Congress expresses the wish that the teaching of Political Economy may be introduced into all the establishments for public and private tuition, on the largest possible scale, not only in the universities but also in the primary schools, and that with this view teachers be sought capable of rendering this science popular."

Seventh, "The Congress expresses the wish that other imposts may be everywhere substituted for the octroi duties, and that its members may in each country consider as to the best means of effecting this change."

Eighth, "The Congress declares, that it is desirable that the definitive and permanent liberty of the importation and exportation of alimentary substances should be proclaimed and established as a principle of international right."

Ninth, "The Congress expresses the wish that in all countries, and especially in England where the duties amount to a prohibition, the wine duties may be reduced."

Tenth, "The Congress expresses the wish that the import duties on matters of the first necessity, (such as iron and combustibles), may be gradually and definitively abolished with as little delay as possible."

Eleventh, "The Congress expresses the wish that the customs laws may be simplified and rendered uniform, in such a way that being clearly and concisely expressed, they may be all included in a single code."

Twelfth, "The Congress expresses the wish that in all countries a general reform of the customs tariff (either immediate or progressive) may be undertaken without regard to reciprocity; and the Congress is of opinion that in pursuing this reform, governments would act in the interest of justice and of international peace, and to the advantage of the operatives, of the protected classes themselves, and of their own finances; and the Congress condemns in the strongest manner the system of prohibitions, of domiciliary or personal visits, of bounties on exportation, and of reprisals."

Lastly, The following two propositions were sanctioned by sub-committees specially appointed to consider them, and also by

the committee of Propositions, and were referred by the Congress to the consideration of the new Association, viz.

"The Congress considering that Commercial Courts judge mercantile disputes with less delay, less expense, and a more perfect knowledge of commercial usages than the ordinary tribunals, and that Chambers of Commerce render great services to trade, expresses the wish that commercial courts and chambers of commerce may be generally established."

"That it is desirable to realize a uniform system as regards weights, measures, and coinage; the tariff of international communications by telegraph and by the post (including the transmission both of letters and books); commercial documents; and generally with reference to everything that concerns international commerce."

III.—*The present state of the Dwellings of the Poor, chiefly in Dublin.* By the Rev. Thomas Jordan, A.M.

[Read December 15th, 1856.]

FOR the last few years considerable attention has been given to the condition of the working classes. One of the most obvious tests of that condition is the state of their dwellings, and as I have daily opportunities of observing these, the present question is one that often passes through my mind. It is generally allowed that the dwelling or the house accommodation is closely connected with the improvement and elevation of the occupier. Let any one become acquainted with some of the poorer classes in the streets in which they generally live, and let him try to point out the duty of charity, the evil of drunkenness, or let him dwell on higher interests, and tell of the time and place when sorrow and death will be no more, he will find the most serious obstacles to his teaching in the state of things around him; that the wretchedness by which he is surrounded certainly does not open the poor man's mind to charity and love; that squalor and destitution are most serious hindrances to his entertaining those just views of Providence, which are as essential to human happiness as they are to leading the mind to more solemn convictions. "Dr. Southwood Smith," says Mr. Vanderkiste, the London City Missionary, "has remarked upon the peculiar depression of spirits and emaciation produced by inhaling the impure atmospheres of close, filthy, and ill-ventilated neighbourhoods. This amiable and learned physician considers such depression to be *one* cause of the intemperance of the working classes—a statement with which I entirely coincide. A common expression is, 'You feels low and dull like, and a drop of gin cheers yer.'"^{*} The Earl of Shaftesbury, at the ninth annual meeting of the Society for Improving the Condition of the Laboring Classes, said, "Depend upon it, this is the

^{*} "The Dens of London," by Mr. Vanderkiste, 1854.