



## Parliamentary Speeches, Political Economy, and the Corn Laws (1839-1846)

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### ABSTRACT

Debates in the British House of Commons between 1839 and 1946 revealed four distinct positions on the controversial Corn Laws. The Radicals, led by Richard Cobden, fought for overall free trade. The moderate Whigs, headed by Lord John Russell, leaned toward a fixed duty on imported corn. The Conservative Peelites, rallied behind Robert Peel, supported the prevailing sliding-scale system, while the landed Tories, who coalesced around Lord George Bentinck, wished protection all around. This article analyzes how the principles of political economy got entangled with political considerations in the speeches delivered by the leaders of each parliamentary faction. It concludes by highlighting the crucial role of political economy, especially the free trade doctrine, along with material evidence and historical precedent, as the key concurring factors in the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846.

**Keywords:** Protection; Corn Laws; Free Trade; Tariff Policy; Food Imports

### Discursos parlamentares, economia política e as Leis do Trigo (1839-1846)

### RESUMO

Os debates na Câmara dos Comuns da Grã-Bretanha entre 1839 e 1846 revelam quatro posições distintas sobre as controversas Leis do Trigo. Os radicais, liderados por Richard Cobden, lutavam pelo livre cambismo. Os Whigs moderados, encabeçados por Lord John Russell, inclinavam-se a favor de uma tarifa fixa sobre o trigo importado. Os conservadores Peelites, unidos em torno de Robert Peel, apoiavam o prevalecente sistema tarifário de escala móvel, enquanto os Tories ligados à terra, os quais convergiram em torno de Lord George Bentinck, ambicionavam por um protecionismo geral. O artigo analisa como os princípios

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de economia política viram-se envolvidos com considerações políticas nos discursos dos líderes das facções parlamentares indicadas. As conclusões ressaltam o papel da economia política, notadamente a doutrina do livre comércio, da evidência material e do precedente histórico como os fatores decisivos na supressão das Leis do Trigo em 1846.

**Palavras-chave:** protecionismo; Corn Laws, livre cambismo; política tarifária; importações de alimentos

## Discursos parlamentarios, economía política y las Leyes de Trigo (1839-1846)

### RESUMEN

Los debates en la Cámara de los Comunes de Gran Bretaña entre 1839 y 1846 revelan cuatro posiciones distintas sobre las controversiales Leyes del Trigo. Los radicales, liderados por Richard Cobden, luchaban por el libre cambio. Los Whigs moderados, encabezados por Lord John Russell, se inclinaban a favor de una tarifa fija sobre el trigo importado. Los conservadores Peelites unidos a Robert Peel, apoyaban el prevalente sistema tarifario de escala móvil, mientras que los Tories relacionados con la tierra, los cuales estaban juntos a Lord George Bentinck, lidiaban por un proteccionismo general. El artículo analiza cómo los principios de la economía política se vieron envueltos con consideraciones políticas en los discursos de los líderes de las facciones parlamentarias mencionadas. Las conclusiones resaltan el papel de la economía política, notablemente la doctrina del libre comercio, de la evidencia material y del precedente histórico como los factores decisivos en la supresión de las Leyes del Trigo en 1846.

**Palabras Clave:** proteccionismo, Corn Laws, libre cambio política tarifaria, importaciones de alimentos

### Introduction

The debates on tariff reform in general, and on the Corn Laws in particular, which recurrently engaged the Commons between 1839, when the reinstatement of a fixed duty on food imports was formally proposed, and 1846, the year in which grain, cattle, and clothing protection got finally repealed, span two administrations, namely: the end of the second Whig government of Viscount Melbourne (1835-1841) and the whole length of Robert Peel's second premiership (1841-1846).<sup>1</sup> This specific interval is relevant for three basic

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<sup>1</sup> Following the Napoleonic Wars, a full embargo on importing wheat until its price reached 80s per quarter for three weeks – with similar ceiling prices set for other kinds of grain –, became law on 23 March 1815 (BARNES, 1961, p. 117-139). In 1828, a stepwise scale of diminishing duties on foreign corn was adopted under which the rate of the duty levied diminished as the domestic price of corn rose. The sliding-scale on

reasons. First, because modern studies on the repeal of the Corn Laws carried through a meta-analysis of the parliamentary proceedings have not fully scrutinized the distinct arguments on the issue pervading the key four lines of thought to the matter prevailing at the lower house over the period (SCHONHARDT-BAILEY'S, 2006, p. 191-226). Second, the interpretation of the controversy in terms of an alleged struggle between free trade, on the one hand, against protection, on the other, overlooks the subtleties of political thinking during those years (GRAMPP, 1987; KINDLEBERGER, 1975). Lastly, the Commons' speeches on British protective system offer a concrete illustration of how the same principles of classical political economy could substantiate differing positions when deployed amid the parliamentary fray. This more focused look at the political debates over the matter of free trade at the time provide a real illustration of how economic doctrines can play a significant role in the unfolding of practical policy, instead of being treated as simple mirror images of objective conditions.

A brief description of the state of the British economy after the Great War with France can provide an outline of the circumstances surrounding the parliamentary debates thereafter. First, Britain have been experiencing the peak of a demographic shift started in the previous century through a steady rise in birth rates which brought the overall population of the Isles from 8.6 million in 1801 up to 14.9 million people in 1841. The enclosures of fields had created a three-layered structure in British agriculture composed by landowners, tenant farmers, and landless labour. Food production though had been growing through the reclamation of wastelands and the increase in the size of farms, which facilitated the adoption of new methods of cultivation and more durable equipment. The increase in agricultural productivity meant that employment in primary activities declined from 33.9 to 22.2 per cent over the period, whereas the share of population in manufacturing activities rose from 29.7 to 40.5 in parallel. Industrial concerns have been displaying a broad disposition as well to undertake product and capital goods innovations, especially in new power sources and textile machinery, raising productivity all around. This swelling movement was accompanied by a deflationary policy towards the resumption of gold payments in 1821, followed by a quick rise in unregulated joint-stock banking and easy credit, making for a succession of financial bubbles and credit stringency the following decades. Lastly, the government came out of the war with a heavy debt and pressed by the need for fiscal reforms but having to submit its taxation policies to harsh parliamentary scrutiny (WRIGLEY, 2008, p. 57-95; ALLEN, 2008, p. 96-116; BRULAND, 2008, p. 117-146; DEANE; COLE, 1969, p. 98-240).

Against this backdrop, we shall inspect the key features of the parliamentary rhetoric over protection in general, and the Corn Laws in particular, adopted by the leaders of each

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corn imports would be altered again in 1842 – along with the end on the prohibition of imports of cattle and many sorts of raw materials –, to be ultimately repealed in 1846 (GORDON, 1971, p. 52-66; CROSBY, 1977, p. 1-126; BARNES, 1961, p. 187-202, 249-253).

of the following representative groups within the Commons, specifically: Richard Cobden for the outright free-traders; Lord John Russell for the fixed duty liberal Whigs; Lord George Bentinck as the belated voice of the full protectionist Tories; and Robert Peel for the moderate wing of the Conservative Party supportive of the sliding-scale arrangement.<sup>2</sup> The comparison, perhaps unsurprisingly, finds out that theoretical propositions from contemporary political economy, whilst usually belittled by modern scholars (IRWIN, 1998; GORDON, 1971; GRAMPP, 1987), did actually play a meaningful role in parliamentary debates and critical policy prescriptions. That said, however, such role was clearly a broad one, serving well all quarrelling sides, and complementary to the pattern of thought tacitly shared by the Commons, who always stood alive to the outdoor impact of their speeches. According to Christopher Reid's (2012, p. 59-75) insightful description, they typically behaved as protagonists in a "fictitious tribunal". For the subject under scrutiny below, that meant conferring great weight, first, to hard evidence on the state of the economy, which could be gathered from parliamentary committee's reports, trade statistics, official price data, government accounts, and specialized books; second, to historical precedent, most notably to the liberal leaned policies implemented by William Huskisson in the 1820s; and, lastly, to the fast-developing reality of the time, comprehending the demographic evolution of the country, as well as the situation of potential food suppliers in continental Europe and the Americas.<sup>3</sup> It will be argued also that Peel's late move to repeal the Corn Laws marked the coronation of his remarkable accomplishments conceived to strengthen the nation with a more resilient economy operating under a clear set of rules applicable to all productive agents.

## Cobden on wages and free trade

As the head of the Anti-Corn Law League, created in 1838, Richard Cobden, son of a poor Sussex farmer and later a well-succeed merchant and manufacturer of calicoes (MORLEY, 1903, p. 1-139), entered Parliament in 1841 proclaiming himself the fiercest enemy of monopoly. Cobden self-professed mission consisted in cutting the roots of the "great tree of protection" which had spread out its long branches from the big trunk of the

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<sup>2</sup> After the Reform Act in 1832, the usual split of politicians between Whigs and Tories was gradually replaced by the modern terms Liberals and Conservatives (HAWKINS, 2015, p. 99-153; HILTON, 2006, p. 239-538).

<sup>3</sup> William Huskisson (1770-1830) was a distinguished member of the Commons since 1804, President of the Board of Trade from 1823 to 1827, as well as Secretary of State for War and the Colonies in the years 1827-28. His foreign commerce reforms introduced a series of liberal measures encompassing a significant reduction of prohibitive duties, the opening of colonial trade to nations willing to reciprocate, along with legislation simplifying navigation and shipbuilding. He died tragically after being run over by a steam-engine during the inauguration of the Liverpool-Manchester railway line on 15 September 1830 (ROWE, 2018; BRADY, 1967, p. 111-167; LINGELBACH, 1938).

Corn Laws. Once the tree was downed, thought Cobden, the whole protective system would fall apart by itself. The efficacy of the League's agitation outside Parliament was primarily due to its exclusive aim at the restrictions on food imports, or the so-called bread-tax, as the mainspring of the ongoing economic distress. To the League, the crux of the matter was that the Corn Laws had been enacted to the sole benefit of one class of society: the landowners.<sup>4</sup> This rigorously focused plan of action allowed the organization to muster the support of the middle-classes along with quite a few dissenting religious leaders in the habit of fighting the monopoly of the official Anglican Church over spiritual and civil matters (MORLEY, 1903, p. 126, 143). The League's attempts at co-opting the working masses to the free trade movement, however, resulted less effective because of its direct competition with the electoral ambitions of the Chartists (PICKERING; TYRREL, 2000, p. 88-115, 139-164).

Cobden's speeches were always on the offensive. His line of argument commonly laid down a forceful case for the idea that unconditional free trade in corn would become an economic and social achievement, whereas food protection was submitting the masses to a miserable and unsustainable state. A crucial aspect in Cobden's overall vision of the functioning of the British economy lay on the assertion that the goals of the landowners were in direct opposition to the general interest of the working people. On the face of it, David Ricardo's theory of land rent and capital accumulation might have been a likely source of Cobden's vision. But Ricardo had explained land rent as an encroachment upon farmers' profits via an increase in corn prices and, consequently, on money wages, occasioned by the need to cultivate less fertile soils. In the short run, nominal wages would be defined by the supply and demand for labour, admitted Ricardo, but in the course of time, they would settle down at the subsistence level required to perpetuate the working population (RICARDO [1817] 2004b, p. 67-84, 93-127).<sup>5</sup> Cobden, as most members of Parliament, had too much of a practical mind though to rely exclusively on abstract reasonings about long run forces. Instead, he appears to have embraced the proposition, firstly set forth by Thomas Robert Malthus, that industrial wages changed by less than the full variation in corn prices, with their money value being determined by the competition among wage earners, on the

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<sup>4</sup> On the League's innovative methods concerning the management of its nationwide network, financial subscription, propaganda, public meetings, electoral registration, and parliamentary action, see Pickering and Tyrrel (2000, p. 14-66, 165-216) and McCord (1975, p. 163-87).

<sup>5</sup> During his years in Parliament, and in his 1822 pamphlet *On the Protection of Agriculture*, Ricardo defended the imposition of a gradually declining duty on corn until it reached a level sufficient to compensate the landlords for their special burdens (RICARDO [1822] 2004a, p. 201-271; HOLLANDER, 1977). There was no consensus though on how to deal with the Corn Laws even among Ricardo's followers. The young John S. Mill called for the immediate adoption of a fixed duty on foreign grain. Contrariwise, Thomas de Quincey opposed the repeal of protection, since free trade would mean a larger cultivation in agricultural countries, the consequent rise of rents there, and hence higher prices of imported corn. Robert Torrens, for his turn, advanced the idea of free trade strictly under condition of commercial reciprocity. John Ramsay McCulloch was the only one who stayed close to Ricardo's proposal (MILL, [1825] 2006, p. 69; TORRENS, 1833; DE QUINCEY, 1839; MCCULLOCH, 1841).

one side, and among employers, on the other. That was the basic rationale underpinning Cobden's indictment of agricultural protection for the decline in living standards of the working people in Britain.<sup>6</sup>

The dissociation between food prices and wages had the further advantage of allowing the Leaguers to refute the protectionists' usual contention that radical reformers cared only for the selfish interest of the captains of industry, who have been fighting for low food prices only to depress wages at home and, therefore, improve the competitiveness abroad of British manufactured goods. Cobden, however, countered that in times of bad harvests, when food becomes expensive, wage earners must spare a larger fraction of their income to bare subsistence, reducing in commensurate extent their purchases of domestic wrought articles. As manufacturing profits recede with faltering sales, so would production and employment. This contractionary movement reacts then negatively on the demand for labour, pushing wages down and composing still further the suffering of labouring classes in urban centres. During a public meeting of the League in London in 1843, Cobden drew on a rather inspired analogy to describe the dual nature of the British economy under the protective system: "The agricultural and the manufacturing interests would seem to be like a two-buckets on a draw-well, the one going down empty as the other comes up full" (COBDEN, 1903a, p. 34).

In his maiden parliamentary speech, in 1841, Cobden spoke up against the blatant injustice of food protection, pointing out that the prevailing duties on corn forced wage earners to pay the punishing proportion of 20 per cent of their income to cover the extra-charge on the price of bread, while the real burden of the same tariff was entirely negligible to the aristocracy and the well-off. The destitute condition of millions of the poor and honest people of the country, cautioned Cobden, should become the foremost concern of all members of Parliament, who have been mercilessly neglecting the numerous popular petitions for the repeal of the Corn Laws. Yet, the result of the 1841 election, Cobden retorted to the oblivious Conservatives, was not an endorsement of the corn monopoly, as they have been bragging about, but instead a sign of popular confidence in Peel as the man to lead the nation. Free trade, by allowing cheaper grain into the country, would not only improve the material condition of the labourers by increasing their purchasing power, but also, by expanding manufacturing sales at home and abroad, bring forth more employment and, as consequence, higher wages in industrial districts.

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<sup>6</sup> Writing in 1814, in the first edition of his *Observations on the Corn Laws*, Malthus criticized Adam Smith's proposition that a bounty on the export of grain would be of no effect on the real price of corn, since wages and the prices of all other commodities would be augmented in similar proportion (SMITH [1776] 1904, Book IV, chap. V). As explained by Malthus, only two-fiftieth parts of ordinary wages were dedicated to buying food, and for moderate changes in corn prices, wages would not respond in the short-term, since they were determined indeed by the forces of supply and demand (MALTHUS, 1814, p. 1-15).



They [the manufacturers] did not wish to diminish wages, but they claimed the right to exchange their manufactures for the corn of all other countries, by which means they would, he [Cobden] maintained, very much increase trade; and how they could do that except by calling into operation an increased amount of labour, he was at a loss to imagine. And he would ask the noble Lord how could they call an increased demand for labour into activity without raising the rate of the wages of the working classes?<sup>7</sup>

How then did Cobden justify the need for the unilateral adoption of free trade by Britain in a world full of protectionist nations? Such extreme proposal had never been embraced as a reasonable foundation of foreign policy by previous authorities, for they had historically privileged either reciprocity or reprisal on matters involving trade deals with overseas nations. First, Cobden sustained that the repeal of the Corn Laws would provide food supplying countries with adequate means to buy additional British manufactured goods, and from this enhanced demand the much looked-for employment to the fast-growing population of the British Isles would follow. Second, with the corn protective duties in place, times of bad harvests in Britain demanded sudden imports of grain from Europe at exceedingly high prices, draining bullion away from the country and contracting therefore the money supply, with an obvious deflationary impact over domestic businesses. That should no longer happen when the provision of foreign corn had already been adjusted to a steady demand from Britain. Third, as Ricardo had argued in his 1815 *Essay on Profits*, the continuance of peace following the worldwide connection of commercial interests would render wars economically unfeasible (RICARDO [1815] 2004c, p. 1-41). Lastly, complemented Cobden, by making competition the norm for all economic activities, the common people would thrive and prosper, ending the discriminatory taxing policy instated to attend one small privileged group at the expense of the most vulnerable core of British society. As the League's leader defiantly responded to Prime Minister Peel, after the latter had stated that the call for unrestricted trade in grain aimed just to reduce manufacturing costs:

I think manufacturers take too intelligent and enlightened a view of their own position and interest to suppose that the impoverishment of the multitudes they employ can promote or increase manufacturing prosperity. Sir, by deteriorating such a vast population as that employed in manufactures, you run the risk of spoiling not the animal man only, but the intellectual

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<sup>7</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*, Cobden, 25 Aug. 1841 (as usual, here and thenceforward, the name and date allow one finding the speech in the British Parliament website search mechanism). William Cobbet (1763-1835) first published *Cobbet's Parliamentary Debates* in 1804, a compilation of newspapers' *non verbatim* reports of the Common's daily proceedings slightly edited for publication. Thomas Curson Hansard (1776-1833) was Cobbet's printer and in 1812 took over the enterprise. He decided to publish also accounts of parliamentary speeches since 1066 in several volumes, which became known as *Hansard. The Parliamentary Debates*, later managed by Thomas Hansard Jr (1813-1891), survived until 1891. In 1908 the Commons eventually set up its own reporting staff (FARRELL; VICE, 2017, p. 17-25).

creature also. It is not from the wretched that great things can emanate; it is not a potatoe-fed population that ever led the world in arts or arms, in manufactures or commerce. If you want your people to be virtuous or happy, you must take care that they are well fed.<sup>8</sup>

As Britain continued to import large amounts of corn, there was no purpose in appealing to the security of its supply in times of war, as the protectionists usually insisted upon, if that goal could not be achieved under conditions of prolonged peace. Above all else, claimed Cobden, the total removal of barriers to foreign trade in food would represent the triumph of that major principle of liberty so much cherished by the British people. Only a man of sinister interests or incapable of comprehending the true teachings of political economy would stand in the path of economic freedom and the reformist spirit of the age.<sup>9</sup> By going alone for free trade in corn, Britain would point the way forward to the concert of nations, educating others on how they could as well reap the full benefits of the international division of labour amid a peaceful environment.

We have set an example to the world in all ages; we have given them the representative system. Why, the very rules and regulations of this House have been taken as the model for every representative assembly throughout the whole civilized world; and having besides given them the example of a free press, of civil and religious liberty, and of every institution that belongs to freedom and civilization, we are now about to offer a still greater example; we are going to set the example of making industry free — to set the example of giving the whole world every advantage in every clime, and latitude, and production; relying ourselves on the freedom of our industry.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, like many of his peers, Cobden was keen on showing that a real precedent to his views already existed, for Huskisson's former liberal policies could be pointed out as entirely compatible with his own vision. On one of the Commons' sitting, an enthusiastic Cobden even warned Peel that the soon-to-be Prime Minister should not distort the late statesman's intentions who, in one of his last speeches, had allegedly claimed that the restrictions on food imports were irreconcilable with public prosperity.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Cobden, 24 Feb. 1842.

<sup>9</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. 27 Feb. 1846, p. 290, 292; see also 7 Apr. 1842, p. 34; 13 Mar. 1845, p. 810, and Cobden (1903b, p. 217-258).

<sup>10</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Cobden, 27 Feb. 1846, p. 292.

<sup>11</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Cobden, 25 Aug. 1841, p. 224. In fairness, however, on 25 March 1830 Charles Poulett Thomson had moved for a select committee to revise the whole tax system of the nation. Peel, then Home Secretary, manifested opposition to the unlimited character of the proposal. Huskisson, for his part, spoke in favour of the motion due to what he considered the excessive taxation brought about by the war. His intervention, in that context, was far from being an appeal for the immediate abolition of the Corn Laws as improperly suggested by Cobden.



## Lord John Russell and fiscal free trade

The great champion of the 1832 Reform Act and two-times Prime Minister Lord John Russell (1846-1852, 1865-1866), an aristocrat from a long-standing Whig family, was the chief voice of the Party liberals during the second Viscount Melbourne cabinet. Belonging to the new generation of Whigs from the early nineteenth century, the young Russell went to study in Edinburgh where he was able to catch the last glimpses of the Scottish Enlightenment under Dugald Stewart (WALPOLE, 1891, p. 105-110). As a politician, Lord John Russell embodied the traditional, moderate, and aristocratic stream of Whiggism, which stood for the prominent role of Parliament, the toleration of dissenters, the Whigs' leadership of social movements, and economic progress through commerce. These wide-ranging goals were to be attained through the guidance of the enlightened section of the Party, avoiding thus the blind radicalism of abstract principles, as well as the deleterious influence of both the Crown and popular democracy (GASH, 2013, p. 157-200; CHITTICK, 2010, p. 145-173; HILTON, 2006, p. 346-353; PARRY, 1996, p. 142-172).

What may seem intriguing is that until 1845, Lord John Russell and the moderate Whigs constituted indeed the first bulwark within the Commons against the full repeal of the Corn Laws. Despite his vote for the Duke of Wellington's first sliding-scale in 1828, Lord John Russell changed his mind toward a fixed duty stance sometime during the late 1830s for reasons akin to those formulated by John Ramsay McCulloch. Following in Ricardo's footsteps, the Scottish economist had condemned the sliding-scale of duties on corn for their bringing about too much speculation while adding more uncertainty to the whole economy, hampering therefore the possibility of Britain obtaining a steady supply of food from overseas (MCCULLOCH, 1841; see also O'BRIEN, 1970, p. 378-95).

Pressed by the financial sword hanging over the government's head, on 30 April 1841 Lord John Russell announced to his peers he would introduce, by the end of May, a resolution concerning the Corn Laws. Right after that, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir Francis Baring delivered his budget speech unveiling a deficit of 18 million pounds for the past fiscal period, to be met by loans along with a projected deficit of 2.4 million pounds for the coming year.<sup>12</sup> Unwilling to raise taxes close to an electoral cycle, Baring suggested that the existing prohibitive duties on foreign timber and sugar be lowered to expand the public revenue through the consequent increase in imports.<sup>13</sup> Felling the uneasiness pervading the

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<sup>12</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Chancellor, 30 Apr. 1841, p. 1295-1308.

<sup>13</sup> The proposal followed the recommendations of the report by the 1840 *Committee on Import Duties*, which prescribed the reduction of excessive duties to foster the nation's imports and hence increase the government's revenue from that source (HOUSE OF COMMONS, 1840, p. vi-vii). The idea, however, had been circulating within the lower house since the 1820s, usually accompanied by the denunciation of the perverse effects of protection over the people's morals by the encouragement given to smuggling and other related crimes (see, for instance, UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Colonel Davis, 10 Mar. 1825, p. 986-989).

House about the new economic measures, Lord John Russell anticipated his highly awaited speech to 7 May, when he finally put forward the plan of a fixed duty of 8s per quarter on corn, along with lesser duties for the other kinds of grain. As economic matters did not really appeal to the Whig spokesman, his overall exposition on the subject was quite dull and centred on the need for an extra revenue to maintain the Navy and Britain's military muscle around the world.

When specifically addressing the sensitive issue of the sugar trade, Lord John Russell argued that the newly freed population of the West Indies colonies have been quickly improving their living standards, while the British workers have been enduring tough conditions at home due to the then current economic distress. It was advisable, therefore, albeit no doubt highly controversial, that cheaper sugar and coffee raised by slave labour countries, such as Brazil and Cuba, which circumvented prohibition of imports by coming first to South Africa, should now be allowed into Britain since otherwise these same commodities would end up in Germany or Switzerland, countries which had no concern whatsoever about how their food was grown. With typical government optimism, the Whig leader assured his audience that the lowering of duties would greatly stimulate the domestic demand for sugar and even occasion an increase in its price, barring thus any losses to colonial trade, a segment with substantial representation in the Commons. In brief, the outcome of the new tariff policy would materialize itself in an enlarged acquisition of foreign corn, sugar, coffee, and timber, generating thus a comfortable supplementary revenue sufficient to cover the future fiscal deficit.<sup>14</sup>

The half-hearted position of the liberal Whigs on protection would become explicit once more during the proceedings related to Prime Minister Peel's 1842 new sliding-scale on corn imports. The principle of non-interference, said then Lord John Russell, should be the uppermost guide in public policy related to economic affairs. The cultivation of corn, however, was entitled to a special treatment. First, as Ricardo had argued, the unique charges falling upon British agricultural activity made untaxed competition from European countries unfair to domestic farmers, who were forced to shoulder special burdens unknown to foreign producers (RICARDO, [1822] 2004a, p. 243-248). Second, according to Adam Smith's advice, once domestic industries have been established under the shade of long-standing legislation, the movement toward freer trade should be undertaken with great circumspection to avoid unduly domestic unemployment and weighty economic losses to the parties involved (SMITH, [1776] 1904, Book IV, chap. II). Peel's new sliding-scale, stated Lord John Russell, set so high a level of duties that it

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<sup>14</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*, Lord John Russell, 7 May 1841, p. 16-42. After eight nights of debates, on 18 May 1841, a large coalition of agriculturists, free traders, abolitionists, and protectionists defeated Baring's tariff proposal by a safe margin. On 5 June, Peel moved for a no-confidence vote on the Whig cabinet. At the end of a thrilling division, the motion carried the day by one single vote, 312 ayes against 311 noes (JENKINS, 1999, p. 85-9; GASH, 1972, p. 251-65; HALÉVY, 1961, p. 342-51).

effectively banned the imports of corn, a circumstance even more damaging because it also prevented Britain from strengthening its commercial ties with the large and quickly developing markets in America and Brazil.<sup>15</sup>

From what has been presented, the liberal Whigs, at least until 1845, did not hold a firm belief in the benefits of unrestricted commerce with other nations, or for that matter, even with the British colonies. Their pragmatic outlook consisted in cautiously treading a middle path between the two extremes of the House associated with the radical free traders and the downright protectionists. Perhaps the most telling instance of how the liberal Whigs addressed the fiery issue of the Corn Laws was afforded during the debates over Charles Pelham Villiers' 1840 annual motion for free trade. The Whigs, explained Lord John Russell with remarkable candour, were aligned with Huskisson's former attitude toward foreign trade, that is, of allowing freedom to import any commodity, but subjected to a reasonable duty for fiscal and protective purposes. The full and unconditional repeal of the Corn Laws, as requested by Mr. Villiers, would elicit a like remission of all other numerous duties upon manufactured articles, upsetting therefore a wide range of interests that had not even asked for such risky and across-the-board approach.

He [Lord John Russell] was therefore decidedly opposed to the repeal of these protecting duties, whether on corn or manufactures. The system of protecting duties was one which had been approved of by Mr. Huskisson, who had always declared that he had never intended to propose a perfectly free trade. That system he believed to be a perfectly wise one, and he was sure that when a system had been long tried, and found effectual, any sudden change which threw aside all protecting duties would be attended with the greatest distress.<sup>16</sup>

Having thus established the Whig stance toward the Corn Laws in the early 1840s, we shall evaluate the far-reaching significance of Lord John Russell's Edinburgh letter from 22 November 1845. On the occasion, he boldly announced his sudden unconditional support to free trade amid the alarming news of a coming disastrous potato crop in Ireland. Having admitted his changed belief about the desirability of keeping some level of protection to domestic agriculture, the Whig spokesman decided to publicly manifest his intention of no longer obstructing any move toward setting the trade in food completely free. The continuance of Peel's injurious sliding-scale, he wrote, would only compound the suffering of the British people while keeping alive a senseless political strife with the agriculturalists. As put down in the letter:

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<sup>15</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Lord John Russell, 14 Feb. 1842, p. 335-58.

<sup>16</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Lord John Russell, 26 May 1840, p. 635.

I used to be of opinion that corn was an exception to the general rules of political economy; but *observation and experience* have convinced me that we ought to abstain from all interference with the supply of food. Neither a government nor a legislature can ever regulate the corn market with the beneficial effects which the entire freedom of sale and purchase are sure of themselves to produce ... It is no longer worthwhile to contend for a fixed duty (Lord John Russell's 1845 letter, *apud* WALPOLE, 1891, v. 1, p. 423-424; our emphasis).

The historical significance of this piece can be hardly exaggerated since it set off a profound change in political circumstances. Thenceforward, a large section of the Commons, and one of the nation's strongest political forces, would rally behind the call for free trade. The abolition of the Corn Laws was no longer a wild flag waved only by exasperate radicals, as many among the Commons used to deride the free traders. Now, any cabinet in Britain's political landscape endeavouring to sustain protection on food imports would be doomed to failure. In that wake, even the time-honoured Navigation Laws were set to be revoked soon afterwards, while future attempts at restoring some sort of protection to agriculture after 1846 would come to naught (CONACHER, 1972, p. 111-170; HAWKINS 2007, p. 1-60, 159-230, 311-366; STEWART, 1971, p. 139-215).

## Lord Bentinck and the Tory case for protection

Broadly speaking, British conservatives regarded the Crown, the official Anglican Church, the Peerage, and aristocratic government as the age-old foundations of the Kingdom's grandeur. Wherefore, the Conservative Party was instinctively sympathetic to any measure supporting the stability of the religious, political, and economic institutions of nineteenth-century Britain. The Conservatives' challenge, however, especially after the Reform Act, resided in the goal of winning political authority by diversifying their political basis to embrace a larger segment of the urban electorate. But once political authority had been attained, the Party should as well make sure that some measure of change would happen, accompanying thus the natural evolution of society (GASH, 2013, p. 119-56).<sup>17</sup> This predicament was yet to clearly manifest itself to the landed Tories after the Napoleonic Wars. As mentioned, one of the reasons for passing the Corn Laws in 1815 lay on the need for steering the country away from foreign dependence on its supply of food, considering the fragility of the then just established European peace. That strategic concern meant

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<sup>17</sup> The nineteenth-century Ultra Tories believed that all government functions, whether local or central, needed constant management, interference, and discretion, whereas the liberal Tories wanted the State to operate in condition of sheer neutrality, following clear rules with the aim of conforming society to the wise dispensations of Providence (GAUNT, 2003; HILTON, 2006, p. 314-328); for the historical reformist and liberal current within the Tories, see Ashley (1897), Coole (1982, p. 85-117), and Hill (1985, p. 38-44).

protection to domestic agriculture, a decision which had the added benefit of preserving the employment of rural districts in a period of demobilization. The consequent steadiness in the incomes of landowners, farmers, and rural workers would accordingly create a sustainable demand for manufacturing articles, preserving the integrity of the country's economic structure against the vagaries of foreign markets. Still, the customs revenue on food imports was commonly appointed by the Tories as an unavoidable measure to stabilize the budget and honour the service of the heavy war-inherited public debt (BRADY, 1967, p. 40-72; GAMBLES, 1999, chap. 2).

Despite their scepticism regarding Peel's commitment to the Corn Laws during his second cabinet, the more extreme Conservatives left the task of defending protection to the Prime Minister and his talented ministers, like the young and skilful William Gladstone. But the habitual silence of the large aristocratic wing of the Conservative Party had the unwelcome implication that when Peel began to display signs of a faltering loyalty to agricultural protection, they found themselves deprived of a proficient speaker for their cause. To fill that void, Lord George Bentinck, a landowner, racehorse enthusiast, and member of the Commons since 1828, but who had never delivered a full speech before 1845, was chosen as the commanding voice of the landed Tories. In their uncoordinated replies to Peel's motion for free trade in early 1846, the protectionists usually disputed the credibility of the famine accounts in Ireland, while inveighing against the industrialists as egotistical seekers of higher profits through inhumane wages (DISRAELI, 1852, p. 36-41; MCINTYRE, 1989).

If Bentinck needed arguments for his new role as the paragon of agricultural protection, he could easily find a few of them fully articulated by Malthus in *The Grounds of an Opinion on the Policy Restricting the Importation of Foreign Corn*, published in 1815, right before the introduction of the Corn Laws. As high prices of corn and raw produce are indicators of the progress of the country, argued Malthus, they come about from the requirement to expand cultivation into new unpromising soils due to the growth of population induced by the general advancement of society. But such a process brings about as well the introduction of new capital and high farming methods into agricultural activities, creating new venues of capital accumulation and technological progress. The opening of British ports to foreign grain would instead, on the one hand, occasion huge losses in rents, farmers' profits, and employment in the countryside, while, on the other, exposing the kingdom to increased scarcity in times of bad harvests in corn supplying countries. Free trade could only strengthen the international division of labour if there were reciprocity among the nations involved, otherwise it would mean greater dependence of Britain from continental producers, specially from the historically protectionist and suspect France (MALTHUS, 1815, p. 1-32).

Back to Lord Bentinck, in a rather startling three-hour speech, delivered on 27 February 1846, he summarized his overall stance on the proposed repeal of the Corn Laws, showing

his supporters he had undertaken a quite decent research into the subject. In sheer contrast to Cobden and his associates, Lord Bentinck countered that the landlords and wage earners were bound together by the fact that the protection of any article – be that silk, cattle or wheat – increased its domestic consumption and, therefore, created more employment in the respective activity than would be the case in the absence of protective tariffs. But as production within the Kingdom evolved over time, continued Lord Bentinck, gains in efficiency have lowered prices in general, whereas wage rates have been increasing due to the expanding demand for labour. Consequently, the working classes have reaped tangible benefits from protection. That, according to the Tory leader, explained why the British people had become the very one with the highest standard of living among the European nations, as evidenced by the Kingdom's remarkable low rate of mortality.

In making his case, Lord Bentinck drew heavily on the work of Gerald Richardson Porter, statistician of the Board of Trade, who had published *The Progress of the Nation in its Various Social and Economic Relations* in 1836. By retrieving several sources of data, Porter had indicated that the decline of mortality rates in Britain during the first decades of the nineteenth century had been more intense than in continental Europe due to the availability of better housing, food, and clothing, as well as to the adoption of healthier habits, the spread of vaccination, and the drainage of stagnant waters. As for the nation's agricultural sector, the importation of food by Britain in years of normal harvests had been slight, despite the impressive growth of its population after the war. That fortunate situation, noted Porter, came about by the steady advance in domestic tillage, followed by the development of new implements of husbandry, the dissemination of crop rotation, and the large use of chemical fertilizers (PORTER, 1836, p. 22-30, 143-152). Lord Bentinck, of course, readily seized upon these conclusions:

Mr. Porter accounts for this continually diminishing mortality, this improvement of health, and prolongation of life, by the vast amendment in the condition of the people; the less crowded state of their dwellings; the superiority and cheapness of their clothing; to better medical assistance; greater personal cleanliness, and, above all, to the increased command of better kinds of food.<sup>18</sup>

That enviable condition of his fellow citizens, in Lord Bentinck's opinion, was the fortuitous outcome of economic developments in the countryside related to the fundamental issue surrounding the Corn Laws, namely: the ability of British agriculture to feed its own people. Moreover, he did not forget to back up this statement with numerical evidence. From 1801 to 1821, the new land brought into cultivation in Britain, observed the Tory speaker, had kept pace with the increase in souls, although after that period the new enclosures have

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<sup>18</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Lord Bentinck, 27 Feb. 1846, p. 337.



almost died off. But while population in England and Wales had grown from 11.9 million in 1821 to 15.6 million in 1844, an increase of about 32 per cent, the productivity of wheat per acre had advanced by 64 percent, from 17 bushels in 1821 to 28 bushels in 1844. The domestic progression in corn output hence far outstripped the multiplication of mouths to feed. To Lord Bentinck, who at this point evoked precedent, such commendable performance of British agriculture had been the direct effect of the old system of protection, with the consequence that no other country in continental Europe could match the efficiency of the British farmer:

Now, Sir, when disinterested foreigners bear such important and honourable witness as this to our great superiority in farming, I do think it is not a little hard that our own countrymen, manufacturers chiefly, knowing nothing themselves of the science of agriculture, should take upon themselves to hold up to public contempt the agriculturists of England, as being the very worst, instead of what, in truth, they are, the very best farmers in the world.<sup>19</sup>

In short, the skilful account of the state of the British society offered by Lord Bentinck was built upon hard evidence from agricultural productivity and demography. This approach enabled him to link Britain's improvement in the material condition of its workers and their families to the nation's protective system. Unconditional free trade, noted Lord Bentinck, was a rather drastic measure to be implemented only in the limiting case of articles of large consumption impossible to be produced domestically, such as sugar, rice, and tea. Otherwise, protection must stand as the official policy of the nation, with tariffs set around 30 per cent to safeguard personal incomes and employment not only in agriculture, but also in manufactures, handicrafts, and all other trades in general.<sup>20</sup>

## Peel, from protection to repeal

Born to a wealthy cotton manufacturing family from Lancashire, Robert Peel studied at Harrow and graduated with distinction from Christ Church, Oxford, in 1805. He entered the Commons in 1810 by patronage of his father Sir Robert Peel, a member of Parliament, as well as of major-general Arthur Wellesley, the future Duke of Wellington. In 1812, Peel took up the post of Chief Secretary for Ireland in Lord Liverpool's long cabinet (1812-1827). The following year, he presided over the Bullion Committee which substantiated the Currency Act, setting a four-year deadline for the reinstatement of full convertibility in gold of the British pound at the pre-war parity. The Bank of England eventually resumed gold

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<sup>19</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Lord Bentinck, 27 Feb. 1846, p. 345.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 349.

payments in 1821 (FETTER, 1965, p. 85-95). Although the event, later known as Peel's Act, bolstered his name as a solid man of finance, the subsequent deflation hit many businesses hard, especially agricultural interests within his own party. During the Duke of Wellington premiership (1828-30), and seeking to weaken agitation in Ireland, Peel's reformist trait took shape in The Catholic Relief Bill, allowing well-off Catholic representatives to occupy public posts and vote for Irish county seats. The Bill quickly became law, but Peel afterwards fell into the ever-lasting distrust of his hard-line Tory colleagues (CLARK, 1929, p. 36-41; EVANS, 2006, p. 24-26).

Years later, when speaking against Mr. Villiers' motion for free-trade in 1839, who had accused the Corn Laws of promoting industry abroad, Peel explained that domestic food prices have been high because the British agriculture incurred on special burdens, as Ricardo and McCulloch had pointed out, such as the land-tax, the malt-tax, the Poor Laws, and the county-rates. An abrupt repeal of grain protection, he went on, would only throw large swaths of land out of cultivation, and lay off millions of people who, by seeking employment in urban centres, would push wages down, wiping thus out any benefits from cheaper corn. More importantly, though, the long period of peace after Waterloo had allowed countries around the world to reorient in productive ways the resources they had been previously wasting in wars. Making ingenious use of Adam Smith's teachings, Peel pointed out as a fact of life that every agricultural nation would struggle to develop its own domestic industry, a phenomenon he saw as organic and unrelated to the Corn Laws.<sup>21</sup> Competitive advantages were not static and should instead be constantly improved to allow the country to stay ahead of foreign advances. He illustrated his speech with the case of America and other continental economies.

But can anything be more natural than the establishment of manufactories in the United States? As the amount of wild and uncultivated land diminishes, as the operations of agriculture become more difficult, and as the people increase and towns become extended, can it surprise anyone that, in such circumstances, the United States should gradually advance into the rank of a manufacturing nation, and that they should seek to supply the wants of the people from the products of their own industry?<sup>22</sup>

Taking over as Prime Minister for the second time on 30 August 1841, Peel would build his strategy to tackle the huge budgetary deficit left by Viscount Melbourne's administration upon the financial bedrock formerly laid down by Lord Liverpool, Frederick

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<sup>21</sup> When contesting the Physiocratic doctrine, Adam Smith held that along the natural progress of civilization, each country begins exploring to the maximum its agriculture, while cities and manufacturing activities later spring up as result of improvements in farming. This process deepens the division of labour within society and therefore the overall productivity of the economy (SMITH, [1776] 1904, Book III, chap. I).

<sup>22</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Peel, 19 Feb. 1839, p. 683.

Robinson (Chancellor of the Exchequer 1823-1827), and William Huskisson in the 1820s (HILTON, 2006, p. 314-328). After extensive consultations, Peel's historic budget of 1842 weaved together three fundamental measures. The first one comprehended a new sliding-scale of protection to corn conceived to curb speculation and centred on a pivot price of 52s per quarter, well below the then prevailing 73s in place since 1828 (PEEL, 1857, III, p. 342-357). Second, he proposed a temporary three-year reintroduction of the income-tax, which had been successfully imposed during the war and later discontinued, to reverse the deficit into a prospective surplus of £4 million, clearing up thus a respectable manoeuvring room for the government. Lastly, in view of the planned budget surplus, he put forth a bold cutback in duties on raw materials and food, designed to stimulate industry and relieve the poor by reducing the duties of 750 articles out of over the 1200 listed in Britain's protective system. The new maximum duties would be 5 per cent for raw materials, 12 per cent to semi-manufactured goods, and 20 per cent on fully processed articles.<sup>23</sup> In his 10 May speech detailing the new duties, Peel referred to the precedent of Lord Liverpool's government, particularly the large reduction of duties adopted in 1825 covering textile manufactures, metals, and shipping.<sup>24</sup> "I contemplate the matter in the same point of view, as this question was contemplated by a distinguished statesman [Huskisson], now no more, with whom it was my good fortune to act in 1825".<sup>25</sup>

Peel's budget and the respective tariff changes got easily approved by the end of June. The Prime Minister's reengineering of the British economy would include also the 1844 Bank Act, which limited the volume of convertible notes by the Bank England to the gold reserve held at its new Issue Department, while the other new section, the Banking Department, would deal only with traditional discounting operations. The objective of the reform was to avoid undue monetary panic and heavy economic losses to society due to the unchecked issue of private notes by country banks, as Peel believed had happened recurrently after the war (KYNASTON, 2012, p. 127-53; O'BRIEN, 1998). During the debates on the matter, he explained: "They [the Ministers] were not wild enough to suppose that this measure would prevent all undue speculation or insure an invariable paper currency; but there was a species of speculation dependent on an undue issue of paper, which they hoped the measure would check".<sup>26</sup>

Sometime in October 1845, the Prime Minister began to get word from distinct sources that the Irish potato crop was doomed by a blight. By mid-November, he initiated consultations within cabinet about a provisional suspension of the Corn Laws. On 2 December, Peel circulated a memorandum among his ministers in which he expressed

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<sup>23</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Peel, 9 Feb. 1842, p. 201-35; 11 Mar. 1842, p. 422-67; and Gash (1972, p. 295-329).

<sup>24</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Huskisson, 25 Mar. 1825, p. 1197-1222.

<sup>25</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Peel, 10 May 1842, p. 383.

<sup>26</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Peel, 13 Jun. 1844, p. 868.

his agreement with Lord John Russell's Edinburgh letter while putting forth also his own understanding that a definitive, albeit progressive, repeal of the Corn Laws was inexorable. When two of his most important ministers, Lord Stanley and the Duke of Buccleuch, left the government, Peel saw no way forward against the foreseeable resistance from the landed Tories. He then delivered to Queen Victoria a letter of resignation on 5 December 1845. Lord John Russell was formally sent for to put together a new cabinet, but the Whig leader, after exhaustive consultations, declared himself unable to fulfil the task due to an incompatibility between his prospective ministers. In private, however, he communicated to a sister his relief for having failed the rough mission (WALPOLE, 1891, I, p. 421-35). On 20 December, Queen Victoria persuaded Peel to withdraw his resignation and resume the leadership of the country, a proposition he accepted out of reverence for the Crown (PEEL, 1857, III, p. 97-245; GASH, 1972, p. 526-561).

On 22 January 1846, Parliament reassembled and the Prime Minister, now emboldened by the Royal support, rose to the occasion. In his anxiously awaited speech, Peel candidly admitted to his change of heart over protection and attributed it not to abstract principles or political expediency, but strictly to the careful reading of reality. As freedom of action in life partook of the natural sympathy of people, said Peel, protection could only be justified by exceptional reasons of general necessity that no longer prevailed. Contemporary events, he said, paying a clear tribute to Cobden, had shown that wages do not change with food prices, that exports had increased after the tariff reform, and lastly – an issue dear to the Prime Minister, who had twice occupied the Home Office –, that general prosperity had brought about a reduction in crime. To shore up his words with factual evidence, Peel declared he was no longer able to defend protection based on what recent years had taught him:

My conviction has been brought about by *observation and experience*; and I could not, with this conviction, have undertaken the defence of the Corn Laws, either upon the public ground that this country being highly taxed the continuance of protection was necessary, or upon the ground that it was for the interest of the labouring classes that high prices should continue as a guarantee of high wages.<sup>27</sup>

The full disclosure of the new policy took place the following week, during Peel's 27 January 1846 speech. On that day, he listed a series of reductions and remission of duties on raw materials, manufactured articles, and consumption items. The underlying logic of the Prime Minister's motion was to provide immediate relief to the people and to treat agriculture as any other branch of manufacturing activity subject to foreign competition. For the Corn Laws, the scale of duties would be progressively reduced until it came to be finally abolished in 1849, whereas a series of compensations would be advanced to rural

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<sup>27</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Peel, 22 Jan. 1846, p. 77, our emphasis.

areas. The subsequent debates were fierce and dragged on for weeks. On 15 May 1846, the motion finally came to a final division, with 355 in favour and 245 against, conforming a secure majority of 110.<sup>28</sup> On 25 June, with the decisive action of the Duke of Wellington, the motion was approved by the Lords. A few hours later, Peel was defeated in the Commons by a coalition of liberal Whigs and landed Tories over an Irish Bill on crime. Three days later, he resigned. Peel was returned to the lower house in 1848 by Tamworth and died on 2 July of 1850, after a fall from a horseback at the age of 62 years (GAUNT, 2010, p. 143-60; GASH, 1986, p. 697-701).

Having in sight Peel's speeches, memoirs, and economic policy, we must note that the Prime Minister's acceptance of repeal and the corresponding reduction of duties in manufactured goods seemed to him as the final touch on the long-run economic edifice being built by the moderate section of the Party since the last years of Lord Liverpool's administration. But it must be recalled here that the whole institutional structure carefully put together by Peel over his political career was far more sophisticated than Huskisson's. The Prime Minister planned to enhance the nation's prosperity by providing monetary stability, fiscal balance, equitable taxation, and cheapness of provisions. By so doing, Peel believed the British society would be better equipped to withstand the inevitable manufacturing competition from abroad, the recurrent disruptions occasioned by rampant speculation at home, while also improving the morality of the nation by reducing all sorts of crime arisen from poverty.<sup>29</sup>

In conjunction with the repeal of the Corn Laws, the proposal suppressed all remaining duties on the importation of cattle and of most articles of clothing, thereby making the cost of living cheaper for the British worker on several articles of consumption besides grain. That meant a definitive turn in the central government policy toward a more direct, progressive, and socially acceptable arrangement of taxation. To declare oneself a Conservative, proclaimed the Prime Minister to his colleagues of Parliament, did not mean being insensitive to the plight of the people when seeking to make the inevitable process of social change more ordered and, therefore, less harmful.

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<sup>28</sup> Only 114 Conservatives voted for repealing the Corn Laws, while 241 voted against it. The Peelites though counted on the decisive support of 235 Whigs, including almost all the great aristocrats of the Party from whom only a few defections were registered (AYDELOTTE, 1963, p. 153).

<sup>29</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Peel, 9 Feb. 1842, p. 204-206, 27 Jan. 1846, p. 278-81. For Norman Gash (2013, p. 130-141), Peel decided to sever his ties with the landed section of the Conservative Party in order to appease the nation and implement gradual reform. Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey has found that by the mid-1840s many landowners had already diversified their wealth toward commercial and manufacturing assets, being therefore more inclined to accept free trade (SCHONHARDT-BAILEY, 2006, p. 107-26). Douglas Irwin (1998) has signalled the Tory paternalistic tradition as the crucial factor in Peel's about-face on the sliding-scale, when the Prime Minister finally realized that the Corn Laws were harming the poor. Boyd Hilton, on the contrary, has claimed that Peel had his mind set on free trade right back from his time in Lord Liverpool's cabinet (HILTON, 2006, p. 551-557; 1979).

It is not, in my mind, inconsistent with true Conservative policy, that we have extinguished agitation and discouraged sedition, not by stringent coercive laws, but by encouraging the idea amongst the great body of the people, that we, the rich and powerful, are willing to take a more than ordinary share of the public burdens, and to remove those burdens from the people so far as it is possible.<sup>30</sup>

By unofficially supporting Lord John Russell's government (1846-1852) after his own resignation, Peel managed to keep safe the economic structure he had built during his term in office, while even seeing it further cemented by the revocation of the Navigation Acts in 1849. During the proceedings on this last issue, Peel vigorously spoke up for free trade and the end of the colonial system. Britain's relations with the world and the Empire, he declared, should thereafter be based on economic ties and mutual interests instead of force. He closed one of his speeches on the matter by approvingly quoting Huskisson's remarks on colonial policy put forth in 1825 emphasizing that civilization advances only through commerce, freedom of enterprise, and the spirit of adventure.<sup>31</sup> Peel's intervention was immediately hailed by Lord John Russell, who observed that free trade had been accepted as the basic principle of economic science for decades, being now shared by all enlightened spirits of the age.<sup>32</sup>

## Concluding remarks

Contrary to some claims, contributions of classical economists were recurrently brought up amid the debates over Britain's protective system in the 1840s, there being, however, no marked cleavage as to which of their teachings were used by the different sides in dispute. The more educated members of each group in Parliament happened to be fully conversant with the reasons for free trade or yet for it being mitigated or even indefinitely postponed. But if political economy provided generalized rules for public policy, they must be complemented by convincing evidence, along with historical precedent and a thorough analysis of the current state of the nation to move the balance in political affairs. Regarding evidence, Peel believed his monetary, financial, and tariff reforms had been fully effective in promoting the recovery of the economy and, therefore, needed completion in terms of settling once and for all the ever-controversial issue of the Corn Laws, with the extra bonus of allowing a lower level of protection in general. Historical precedent, for its turn, was found by Cobden, Lord John Russell, and Peel in the policy principles set forth by Huskisson in the 1820s.

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<sup>30</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Peel, 22 Jan. 1846, p. 94.

<sup>31</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Peel, 9 Jun. 1848, p. 646-64; Huskisson, 21 Mar. 1825, p. 1111; on the amicable relationship between the young Peel and Huskisson, see Fay (1950, p. 122-127).

<sup>32</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, London. *Historical Hansard*. Lord John Russell, 9 Jun. 1848, p. 668-670.



Lord George Bentinck, for his turn, deployed the same logic when attributing the progress of the nation to its long-established record of protection. Besides that, the rapid growth of population in Britain, on the one hand, and the quick expansion of wheat and sugar cultivation in the Americas on the other, were commonly referred to during the debates as two sides of the same coin that should be soon brought together by free trade. Political economy therefore may be considered as one of the decisive factors in the progressive dismantling of British protective system from 1846 onwards, providing that indispensable intellectual cement bringing together the distinct political forces leaning towards a more liberal organization of contemporary society.

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