

LETTER XII

Universal Suffrage As A Principle Of Union

Circumstances, of which, brethren, you must all be pretty-well aware, have recently drawn my attention to the subject of UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE; a subject on which I have written and spoken at various periods, during a life which has now counted more than three score years ; a subject which has at times awakened the most enlivening emotions of patriotism that I ever felt; a subject which, from the earliest days of my manhood, has never been entirely, for twenty-four hours together, out of my thoughts; a subject which, I promise you, brethren, I will never lose sight of, until death consigns me to the grave. The basis of that representation, on which the branch of the legislature, falsely and ridiculously called the “House of Commons,” is constituted, is property. The men who have got possession of property are entitled, it seems, to make laws for the preservation of it in their own hands; while those who create that property, or are endeavouring by labour and by prudence to get hold of a part of it, though they are numerous, active, and, in a very considerable degree, intelligent, are denied their right to interfere in making the laws they are compelled to obey. This is manifestly unjust; it manifestly makes two separate orders in society; it places the consumers, the capitalists, and the profit mongers in a high degree above the producers; it regards the workman as a slave, and it rivets his chains. No wonder, then, that the cry for universal suffrage has been at times loud and fearful. I have heard its deep, hollow mutterings, like thunder over the waves previous to a storm; and I have felt myself impelled by a resistless impulse of all the best feelings within me, to respond to the tone. Yet, as I looked at the condition of my fellow beings; as I looked closely into the state of dependence in which myself, and men dependent, like me, for their daily bread on the sale they can obtain for their weekly labour in a market of which the profit-mongering capitalists have the control, and of which their House of Commons is the market-clerk, I have paused, and exclaimed, “No; not yet! Social liberty must precede political liberty. While we are in a state of social slavery, our rights would be exercised for our tyrannic employers, and not for our own benefit, and we should be made subservient to their purposes, or, what is worse, to their parties, who, with our aid, would rush into revolutionary conflicts with one another. No; before the horse is turned out to enjoy his freedom in the green meadow, he must be unharnessed from the shafts of the waggon: the galling rein that holds back his neck to the collar must be loosened, the bit must be taken from his mouth, and the collar itself from his shoulder; nor will he go forth in the valley rejoicing in his strength, while the lumber of the seer hangs over his loins and encumbers his feet.

To say, indeed, that we never shall be free, until we have universal suffrage, is saying nothing more than we never shall be free until we are free. We must, consequently, have universal suffrage; and, in the meantime, we must prepare ourselves to hold it, and to enjoy it; but we must not be so weak as to imagine that the possessors of property will grant it as a boon to those who possess nothing but their labour. We may be assured that we shall never be admitted into the legislature until our weight in society is fully felt and acknowledged; and, even could we creep in under any enlargement of the Reform Bill, it would be in some very partial and circumscribed manner. We should be mocked as the ten-pound householders¹⁷ are mocked, with the mere

¹⁷ Those owning property with a rateable value of £10 p.a. or more who became eligible to vote with the passage of the

shadow of enfranchisement, which, in many places, is in no degree a benefit, but rather a grievance, acting injuriously to a man's interest, dependent as such men for the most part are on the capitalists and landlords above them. The franchise of labouring men must be universal, and accompanied by the ballot. But where, and how, brethren, shall we obtain it with the safeguards of short parliaments and the ballot by the side of it? I witnessed, last election, when reform was in every man's mouth, and when thousands actually believed that we had accomplished a great work of liberty, the most disgusting exertions of party influence on the behalf of the Whigs, in a county where there was no necessity to disgrace their wonderful new bill by any interference with the ten-pound voters, who possessed tenements rated at that value. Voters in that situation were made to feel their bondage to capital, and many of them declared that, although on that occasion they had no objection to vote for the Whig candidates, yet they would rather not exercise the franchise at all, than feel as they could not help doing; that they were expected to exercise it, under the painful coercion of dictation. I saw plainly enough, and I said then as I have repeatedly asserted since, that "our position, brethren, is not political, and that it cannot become political with any benefit to ourselves, until we have found means to obtain a greater independent weight in society." This must be the result of UNION.

The characters of society as it at present exists, in what we usually term the civilized portion of the globe, are dependence and competition; and government is a mere party concern, with a long train of the proud and the avaricious clinging to the tail of the party in power. Our interests, brethren, are wholly opposite to theirs. We want nothing from such a government. We cannot be among, its hangers-on; if we could, we should soon perceive the spirit of competition arising among ourselves, and destroying that UNION" on which alone we can ever expect to found that popular influence which is necessary to our social importance. The apple of discord would be speedily thrown among our lodges, and fictitious interests would be raised among us ; and when set at variance with one another, we should be compelled to assist in dirtier work with our boasted franchise than we have yet been put to in our mills or workshops. We are not free, we cannot be free, until we have universal suffrage; but in the spirit and practice of union, we must make it our own, and use it advantageously to ourselves, and to the nation at large. Nor can this be difficult, if we act with integrity and firmness. While we are new-modelling our social condition, we must never lose sight of our want of a political position in this great and powerful country, in which we constitute the great productive class. We are not free, and though we do not bear the opprobrious name of slaves, yet our condition is actually but a very slight and unsettled remove from that of slavery. In such a situation, universal suffrage, were our condescending Whig ministers to bestow it upon us to-morrow, would be worse than useless.

Receive, then, brethren, the principle of universal suffrage as that which ought to be the chief point and direction of all your political thoughts; for, degraded as you are, your thoughts cannot help sometimes taking a political tendency, — and, though your social position is so far from being political, that it absolutely incapacitates you from the exercise of those political rights which, in equity, belong to you as men, you cannot but be sensible that you are naturally upon a level with your oppressors; or, indeed, if any superiority can morally and religiously be imagined among the common descendants of Adam, the superiority must necessarily belong to the class whose ingenuity and labour feeds and clothes, and in every way provides for the conveniency and comforts of the rest. Receive, then, universal suffrage as a principle next in importance, in the treasured ex-

pectations of your souls, to the principle of religion; but do not expect practically to enjoy the freedom which it is to confirm and secure, as long as you want energy and unity to elevate your social condition into a state of independence. Then all the strength and weight of your influence in society will be felt and acknowledged. You will not be merely permitted by the government and the aristocracy, to enter, by your representatives, into the legislature; the legislature must itself necessarily be your own, and, among one of its earliest resolutions must be the declaration that “labour, the CREATOR of property, is superior in its rights to property, which is nothing more than its CREATURE and the work of its hands!”

Legislators, aristocrats, governments, and sovereigns have a sort of instinctive notion that, whenever you have universal suffrage, in a state of social independence, with knowledge and unity to act upon it, the natural result must be your elevation to the very heart of society; and they shudder at the idea of your entering into parliament. Still, it is very possible, as we see by the Reform Bill, that some future petty extensions of the franchise may be offered you, to quiet your clamour; but at the same time means will always be taken by those who make the offer, to render such a boon, like in the bill I have just mentioned, perfectly unserviceable to your interests, and, indeed a mockery rather than a favour. I do not exactly advise you to refuse such boons—I do not advise you even to desist from demanding them, or even from clamouring for them ; but let such demands be secondary to your endeavours to elevate yourselves in your social condition—look upon such boons as nothing in comparison with your social independence! Your present object must be to change your wages into a fair share of profits of the productive concern in which you are employed. This is the object of Trades’ Unions, if they have any rational object at all—and I do not see why it is not at once openly avowed. I would banish the word wages from the, language, and consign it, with the word slavery, to histories and dictionaries. Wages is a term of purchase; it means the piece-meal purchase of your blood, and bones, and brains, at weekly payments; it is the present name for the Saturday’s market price of man, woman, and child! It is as great a stigma to this country as the price of negroes was to the slave mart in our colonies, and it must follow the fate of that infamous and now execrated demand. But this cannot be brought about by a universal suffrage, which, in our present condition, we could not use; but universal suffrage, with all its blessings, must be the immediate result of our enforcing upon the capitalists incessantly, in one form or other, our demands that wages shall be changed into a fair share of the profits resulting from our labour; or, in other words, a fair share of the goods we create; allowing, as I have before suggested, that 2,000 L. in capital shall be entitled to one share in labour. Our means to effect this must be a continual agitation of society until these, our just demands, are admitted. If we are firm, it will not be long before some considerable concessions will be made to us; and as to the smaller capitalists, they must very shortly perceive that, unless they join us, and aid us in commencing works and factories of our own, upon a common-wealth, that is, a common-profit principle, they will be ruined.

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