



THE FREE TRADE QUESTION

Mr. J. Fuller's Position. A Straight Talk with Labourers.

Mr. J. Fuller, M.P., visited this hamlet on Monday evening, in pursuance of his autumn campaign, and held a most interesting and in some respects unique gathering. Being at the eleventh hour denied the use of the Primitive Methodist Chapel, not it seems from any political bias, but because the stewards have a prejudice against their little Bethel being utilised for the promulgation of political principles, and there being no other building available in this somewhat out-of-the-way place, Mr. Fuller was obliged to have recourse to the open air, and addressed the villagers from the steps of Mr. Perrett's cottage. The night was wet and dark, making standing in the open anything but pleasant, but quite a number of those resident in the neighbourhood braved the elements, and listened with interest and attention to Mr. Fuller, who treated them to some straight talk on the vital question of Free Trade v Protection.

Mr. S. Richmond officiated as Chairman, and said they had come to support Mr. Fuller because they believed the principles which he professed would, if put into operation, be for the better government of the Empire (hear, hear).

Mr. Fuller, having expressed his agreement with those who were of opinion that a chapel was not the most suitable place in which to hold a public meeting, and pointed out that he probably had among his audience that evening some who would not have ventured inside a place of worship, came at once to the subject of Free Trade and Protection, which he said marked the line of cleavage, the great difference that today existed between the Tory party on the one hand and the Liberal party on the other. He took it he was addressing an audience composed of agricultural labourers; at any rate an audience composed of those who were interested in or worked upon the land; and there was no other class which in his opinion this question affected as it did them. He defined the proposals of Mr. Chamberlain, which had been adopted by the whole Tory party, and directed attention to the fact that such a policy would lead to a rise in indirect taxation, and to a diminution of purchasing power on the part of the people. The condition of the agricultural labourer in England – he did not say it was as good as it should be – was infinitely better than in any protected country in Europe, and compared with the old days of Protection, in the thirties and forties of the last century, his condition was at least twice as good as it was then. Speaking as one interested in the land, and whose father was a

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considerable landlord, he remarked that the profits made by an increase in indirect taxation, such as Mr. Chamberlain proposed, would probably eventually increase the landlords rents. It was for this purpose that the old system of Protection was maintained by the landlords of 60 years ago, and he had not the least doubt there was a feeling of hope in that direction now which made many landlords anxious to see some such system reimposed. But of this he was perfectly confident that though the landlords might conceivably, he did not say they would, make profits out of the proposed system of indirect taxation, those who would suffer would be the poor, and those who has the least money to buy what they required; and he was one of those who would not lay his hand to any policy which in his heart of hearts he believed perhaps would do him some good, but which, at the same time, would do the great mass of his countrymen harm (applause). He was there to declare to them that for no purpose whatever, be it for so-called imperial purposes, be it for the purpose of increasing the rents of the landlords, or for any other reason, would he, so long as he had a tongue in his head and a vote in the House of Commons, be a party to taxing the food of the people in this country (hear, hear). It was true the imposition of a small tax upon corn would not be heavily felt by the poor of the country, but they must not imagine, if they once got a general system of Protection established, that those interested would be content with a tax of 2s. a quarter upon corn. It had been publicly advocated that such a tax would not do much good to the landlords, and the time was looked forward to when the duty would be increased from 2s. to 5s., and from 5s. to 10s., in order, as it was said, that agriculture should be put upon its legs. Agriculture, he was convinced, could not be regarded as prosperous unless all those who lived upon it were prosperous too. It was not prosperous if the labourer was very poor and the landlord was very rich (hear, hear). Agricultural labourers, 60 years ago, hardly saw meat once a week (A voice: "Twice a year"); but he would remind his friends, the farmers – many of whom he was pleased to reckon among his personal friends – that today the great bulk of the meat produced on the farm was consumed by the agricultural labourer and population upon the land (A voice: I believe that). They must not run away with the idea that the Liberal party had no remedy for the present condition of agricultural districts such as that. He was convinced that the prosperity of agricultural districts in future would depend very largely on an increase in small holdings (hear, hear). The experience he and his father had had upon their property at Neston proved to them that the land was more efficiently cultivated in cases where the holding was comparatively small than in cases where the holding was a large one; and it was part of the policy of the Liberal party, which was included in what was called Land Reform, to take steps, through County Councils or through the central authority in London, and do all they could to increase small holdings in the country, which, in his belief, would make the land more productive than it was today (hear, hear). Where this has been tried it had always succeeded, and where land was ill-cultivated, such as for instance in the east of England, there they nearly always found that it was held by large tenants, and not by small ones (applause). The Liberal party, helped as it was by men like the Duke of Devonshire, and in a neighbouring constituency by Sir J. Dickson Poynder, and others, were the Free Trade party, and they were determined, for many reasons, that the necessaries of life of the people should not be taxed (applause).

A well-known resident of the village, Mr. W. Nobbs by name, who had caused some merriment by his eccentric behaviour and incoherent remarks, was invited by Mr. Fuller to ascend the steps and make his position clear. The crowd, scenting more amusement, pressed Mr. Nobbs to accept the invitation, but instead of doing so he bolted round a convenient corner, and was speedily swallowed up in the darkness.

Mr. Ernest J. White (Liberal Agent) proposed a vote of thanks to Mr. Fuller for his address, which was seconded by Mr. J. Clarke, and unanimously carried.

The Chairman, in reply, thanked Mr. Perrett for the use of his steps, and expressed his gratitude to Mr. Richmond for the work he does on behalf of the Liberal Party (hear, hear).

Before the audience separated "For he's a jolly good fellow" was heartily sung.

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