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IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT.

HOUSE OF COMMONS, MAY 27.

MEDIATION OF RUSSIA.

(Continued.)

After the situation in which this country was placed, after the most full, frank and explicit declaration on the part of his majesty, and after the evasions and delays on the part of France, which nobody could dispute, the only purpose for which they could negociate was, that if the two countries had any difficulty, they might, for their separate advantage, refer to the emperor of Russia, for his good offices to terminate their differences.—Now he would ask the house, whether his majesty's government would have been justified on fair grounds, to do.—What?—to say, "we are not ready to enter into the discussion with you, we know our own views, but your's are to delay the issue." It was the interest of this country that the question should be no longer left undecided, he therefore said, that the intervention came under circumstances in which it did not appear to his majesty's government to be wise to alter the instructions which they gave to my lord Whitworth, to bring the negociation to a crisis; for it appeared under all the circumstances to be only calculated for delay on the part of France. The honorable gentleman had stated what great advantage there would be, both with reference to carrying on the war, or the settlement of peace, in consequence of our accepting the mediation of Russia. He agreed with the honorable gentleman in this particular, and he stated the circumstances which were concluded in the year 1781, relating to the right of navigation; and he said, that the emperor of Russia might say, that altho' such a conclusion of the point might be satisfactory to us, it might not be so satisfactory to Russia, and that Russia on some future occasion, might form an expectation to recur to their ancient system on the subject of neutral navigation. Now, he would say, there certainly were individuals in Russia attached to that system of navigation at that time; he would not say there were none of them now; but this he would observe, that the great majority of the most intelligent persons in Russia, and even of the Russian government, were formerly convinced, that upon this subject the interests of Russia were correspondent with the interests of Great Britain;—they were clearly convinced that the contrary opinion, which was taken up by the late empress, who, though most certainly a great princess, had been influenced by the vanity of being at the head of a confederacy in support of that opinion, but now, the most intelligent persons in Russia were well convinced of the weakness of that opinion, and upon the best foundation, because it was manifest that Russia had little or no mercantile marine whatever, nor could have any as all her commerce is carried on in the vessels of other countries, so that the interests of Russia corresponded with those of Great Britain on the subject of neutral navigation in 1781, not to be acted on, Russia would lose its trade in the Baltic; and this was the conviction of all the intelligent persons now in Russia, but he would not put the question on this narrowed ground, it was most unquestionably true that by a connexion between Russia and Great Britain we could best set a barrier to France, without this, or some such concert no hope could be entertained of peace, upon a solid foundation, to this country and to Europe, which must be had on just and honorable terms, but it must not be done by crippling our exertions in the mean time, limiting our powers, or paralysing our strength.—from the declaration, and extract from which he had read, that they even now were in their sentiments and wishes conformable to those which had been expressed by the honorable Gentleman himself, which were for Peace, consistently with the security and the repose of Europe. He could not assent to this Motion, because it would imply a belief that Government were not actuated by any measure that could have such a tendency was inexpedient; his objection, therefore, to the motion, of the Hon. Gentleman was, that he laid no adequate ground for it. Had he not shewn to the House that His Majesty's Ministers had manifested a disposition to Peace, but, on the contrary, it appeared by which had actuated them. He thought also, that the motion might have the effect of unhinging the minds of the people, of checking their exertions, and disappointing their expectations, which, he hoped, were well founded; these were the reasons which occurred to him to object to the motion of the hon. Gentleman. It was not to the general sentiments of the hon. gentleman he objected, but he saw no necessity for the motion under the present circumstances, he therefore begged leave to move the previous question.

Mr. Fox said a few words in explanation.

MR. PITT said, he certainly did not mean to trouble the House for more than a single moment. He rose only to state what he hoped on the present occasion, and to observe, that for the first time in the recollection of any who heard him, for at least a long period of years, in that House, there was little reason to suppose, although the subject was most important, there was any real or radical difference of opinion; he rose, he said, to express a hope that the House would not be brought to a division on the honorable member's proposition, whatever the House might think of the propriety of the motion as an address of advice to his majesty. He perfectly agreed with the honorable gentleman in much of what he had expressed; in most of the general principles laid down by him he was perfectly ready to concur. He had heard that honorable gentleman with infinite satisfaction; and that satisfaction had been greatly increased by hearing from his noble friend so much approbation of such principles, and which left no room to doubt, that in the judgment of government (who, in the first instance, had constitutionally the duty of advising his majesty) these principles ought to be their guide, and that no opportunity of acting upon them would be lost. As to the principles themselves, it would be strange indeed if he had any unwillingness to avow them. They were the principles which, in the best part of the history of our country, had been applied to our situation, in the most important occasions; principles which had so often contributed to our protection, to the protection of our country, and also to a successful resistance against encroachments, against principles which had been upheld in opposition to France so frequently, upon points of national rivalry, that they had led us to consider that nation almost as a natural enemy—principles which are deemed to be liberal and prudent upon all occasions, ever since this country interfered with effect in the affairs of the continent—principles which led us to watch the power which threatened, in the first place, the independence of Europe; and, secondly, connected with the first, the security of Great Britain—principles which he had often maintained, and in which he had often the misfortune to be opposed by that honorable gentleman, with a zeal and vehemence which he was happy to find he did not now employ, but used arguments which amounted almost to contradiction of his former speeches; but he most sincerely rejoiced that these principles were adopted by that honorable gentleman, for they certainly were the principles which had contributed most to the establishment of the character of this country, and were the foundation of its greatness, as appeared in several periods of its history, but never more conspicuously than in the course of the last war. They were principles deeply rooted in his mind, that it was not until the moment he had despaired of any further continental connection, that he thought it would be fitting to look for terms of separate pacification. They were principles on which it was fit to judge of the government of which he had made a part, when it became often his duty to submit to the House expensive and great subsidies, on which the interests of this country were hazarded, and in some instances almost sacrificed to the idea of general security to be obtained, not by a question of terms or expence, as to England, but with a general view of security to the continent. They were the principles which led him to believe that when we had no longer a chance of obtaining the best means of security, of rendering Europe safe against the ambition manifested by France, we were justified in looking for security for ourselves alone, and which satisfied him that when we were making terms for ourselves alone, that we were more at liberty to make concessions calculated to prevent the evils of protracted war, than when our interests were involved with those of an ally. He was anxious to speak sincerely upon this point, and he declared it was not for the purpose of referring to those times when differences subsisted between him and the honorable gentleman upon these subjects, or with any wish to renew the discussions upon them at present, but he trusted that the country would, upon this occasion, have the benefit of the authority of the honorable gentleman, to silence those who, publishing his arguments to extremes yet sheltering themselves under his authority, declaimed against the impropriety and impolicy, at any time, or under any circumstances, of making British sacrifices for continental purposes. He did not mean to contend that continental connexions would justify us in always interfering in the events which occurred on the continent, but on the other hand, he was sure he should not be contradicted, when he asserted that no great and essential change could take place in the relative situation of the powers on the continent, the effects of which would not be material to Great Britain. It, however, by no means followed from that position, that we were bound, with our own separate force, to resist the aggressions against other states, or to avenge their wrongs, if other powers did not feel themselves bound by interest or inclination to join us; but it did follow, that whether we were enjoying the advantages of peace, or engaged in the prosecution of a war—whether we were negociating for the purpose of preventing a war, or for the purpose of concluding a peace, that it must be the duty of government, when they saw a favorable opportunity, to avail themselves of the disposition of great and respectable continental powers and to act in concert with them for the attainment of those objects.

The honorable gentleman had properly abstained from in any degree detailing his view of the application of this mediation to the principal object in dispute. He was glad that the honorable gentleman had done so, and he would adhere to his example. He only wished to say, what perhaps might appear a little whimsical from him, and might seem as if he wished to limit the possible application of the continental principles laid down by the honorable gentleman, and that he was more inclined to contend for separate British interests than the honorable gentleman himself—he was willing to admit, that if there could arise out of the proposal of Russia, any solid ground to hope for, or if there could be engrafted upon it, any chance of producing a system that might restore peace, accompanied with powerful and respectable guarantees, not only of the present object in dispute, but of what remained of the present state of Europe, that object would be in itself so desirable and so important, that he could even conceive that some arrangement, which taken separately, might be less useful to ourselves, might yet be admissible. But upon this no distinct opinion could be given beforehand, because it must depend upon a comparison of the circumstances presented to their choice. Upon this point they were all agreed, that this country ought not to separate itself unnecessarily from this continent, on the contrary that we ought to take every opportunity of connecting and linking ourselves with it upon fair and honorable grounds. But after the experience that we have had, that without any fault of our own, without any departure from the treaties we had made, without any failure of the engagements into which we have entered, we might still be left to struggle alone with France, upon our own resources and upon our own means. If we did know, by clear evidence, of the hostility or of the hostile views of France against us, and that we had at the same time in our hands the means of resisting that particular danger, it would become us to know, that what we received as a substitute for it, should be great and sufficient indeed, before we suffered a doubt to arise in our minds upon the subject—before we parted with that security which British valour had gained, and which it only required British prudence and perseverance to retain. By the acquisition of alliances on the continent, we should always gain an accession of power, but at the same time, he could not give up solid and separate security for continental alliances. He thought it necessary to make these distinctions, that we might not at once adopt those opinions which had begun to be prevalent in the minds of some persons, viz. that we ought at once to abandon continental connexions altogether, but he was equally anxious to avoid the contrary extreme, and that we should not indulge prematurely in the dream looking on the continent for security, on points in which the continent was not concerned. On those points in which the interests of the continent were not involved, our own interests, our own security, must be prosecuted and maintained with vigor and with firmness, unless we were content to be reduced as low in rank and power as some states, whose situation every one concurred in lamenting. This subject might be carried much further, and many observations upon it naturally suggested themselves to his mind; but he would not now trespass any longer upon the house, because he had set out with declaring that he would not occupy much of their time, and because, upon general principles, there appeared to be no difference of opinion. Feeling therefore the justice of the principles which the honorable gentleman had in his mind, and which he had urged upon this occasion, he was inclined to hope that he would not persevere in pressing his motion, because in that case one of the two things must happen, if it would be rejected or if the previous question should be put upon it (which he should think the more consonant to the rules of parliamentary proceeding,) it might be a subject of misconstruction elsewhere, and it might be said, "you were less anxious that France for the establishment of a system which afforded the best prospect for maintaining the security of Europe." If, on the other hand, the motion should be carried, great weight would necessarily result from its being a vote of the house of commons, and, besides unhinging the public mind, it would make that appear to be a forced measure, which would certainly have more effect if it came as a voluntary act of government. Parliament would, he hoped, at all times exercise the constitutional right which it possessed over these subjects; but cases of war or negociation, (unless where there were grounds to suspect abuse,) ought to be left to ministers, with that responsibility necessarily attached to their situation. Upon these grounds he hoped the honorable gentleman would not persist in his motion.

MR. FOX said, he was sorry the right honorable gentleman had referred to topics which included the sentiments maintained by each of them in the late war; the discussion he had no inclination to renew, but in the course of which he believed he had not been so fortunate as to be well understood. He had been of opinion in that war, not that we should have no continental alliances, but that our continental alliances in the last war had been misapplied; and of that opinion was the right honorable gentleman at the conclusion of the war, when we were left without allies. He did not affect any superior sagacity, but he happened to be two or three years beforehand with the right honorable gentleman in opinion upon that subject.—He supported the treaty of Amiens, on the principle that the events of the war, and the injudicious principle of the war, had produced the effect of making our influence on the Continent absolutely void: he thought it necessary to say this, in answer to the observations of the right honorable gentleman. As to the object of security to be taken for the continuance of peace, he foresaw a good deal of difference between the right honorable gentleman and himself, and therefore when a treaty of peace came to be offered, that would be matter for discussion. On the value of the security when offered, the mode to judge would be by comparison, what we sacrificed with the security we received.

Having said this upon the two general topics introduced by the Right Honorable Gentleman, he could assure him and the house, that he had no wish for a division; but notwithstanding that disposition of his to give way, he did not know how far he might not be driven to it by the course which might be followed by the noble lord. He considered the right of the house of commons, to advise the executive power upon all subjects of public policy, to be such as not to be even so much as disputed.—He did not charge ministers with any negligence of their duty, but all he understood was, that a mediation had been offered; now it was equal to him whether that mediation was accepted or was about to be accepted if he heard from the noble lord there was any disposition to accept of that mediation of the Emperor of Russia at this moment, he would withdraw his motion but otherwise he would not very well consent to that course.—As to unhinging the public mind, it was needless for him to say he had no such object, neither did he see that was likely to be the effect of what he was now doing. He had no other wish than that the mediation might be adopted, because he had no doubt it should be effectual. On the subject of the war he should not enter, because nothing could be offered but general arguments on the state of Europe: but as to the hopes of mediation the house was agreed, he believed, that if it be but a vision, it was a vision which we all wished to see realized.—he admitted that the mediation did not secure to us an object, but it would certainly further the chance of gaining it; and therefore he had no wish for a division, if he was given to understand that the mediation would be accepted. The noble lord stated, that the proposition of the Russian minister had been communicated, and that was a great deal. Whoever looked at this matter, and saw how the proposition of the accommodation was made on the part of Russia, would be led to wish that it had not been made by the one and avoided by the other of the parties. If, instead of being stated by the English Ambassador to the French Ambassador, or by the French Ambassador to the English, it had been stated to each of them by Count Marcoff at Paris, or Count Woronzo in London, the negociation would not have taken the turn it did—of that he was perfectly sure. He did not know why that proposition for the mediation of Russia should not, even now, be adopted. He did not know how far French accounts might be depended upon, but they certainly did state the disposition of his imperial majesty the Emperor of Russia to offer his mediation, in a much broader way than any thing we had heard of in London. If the noble lord gave him assurance that the Mediation would be accepted, he should withdraw his motion. It might be said, that if he had no doubt of the disposition of his majesty's ministers, why should he bring forward such a motion as this? Why did he not confide in them?

To which he would answer, that altho' he had no idea it would so happen, yet it might happen that the advantage of the mediation now offered might be lost, and lost by the fault of ministers, a loss that would be irreparable, and then he would have to reproach himself for not calling upon the house of commons to admonish ministers to do their duty by availing themselves of this most propitious offer. Information whether this mediation would be accepted or not, was all he desired, in the first instance, and what he desired much more than he should success to his Motion in the second. He was happy also to observe, that whatever variety of opinion there might be in the house on some topics, they were all agreed on this.

LORD HAWKESBURY rose to explain. He said, that with regard to the mediation of which the hon. gentleman had spoken, and the way in which it came to his Majesty's minister, between London and Paris, and the state of things at the time, made it impossible for ministers to be acquainted with the nature of the mediation immediately after it was offered by his Imperial Majesty. Certainly the sense in which he understood the mediation, it was of the slightest species of assurance of mediation, if indeed it could be so called; in that sense he understood it then, and in that sense he understood it now. His Lordship then stated the contents of the communication to the following effect: "The cabinet of St. Petersburgh, though there appeared a reluctance in the two parties, offer mediation, which was meant with a view to be offered by the minister in London and Paris, to give you the assistance you may desire, and the Emperor will be ready to exert his good offices, to adjust the points in dispute between the two countries." Under these circumstances, the mediation being so general and so loose, and coming at such a moment, his Majesty's government thought they had no alternative than to say they had stated the terms on which they were ready to continue at peace, and probably at this time that Lord Whithworth had left Paris; and therefore looking at that intervention (whatever effect it might have at the beginning) it being so general, and coming at such a time, and being so loose, it was in the judgement of his Majesty's ministers inadmissable; but at the same time they had no disposition to conceal from the government of St. Petersburgh, or from the House of Commons, that they are ready to enter into any explanation to the government relative to the difference between this country and France, and to concert means that may lead to the restoration of peace as soon as possible.

MR. FOX. "Upon the mediation of Russia."

LORD HAWKESBURY. "That his Majesty's ministers are ready on the mediation of the court of St. Petersburgh—on that ground to receive from that court, whatever their ideas may be, and the ground of their judgement on the subject of arrangement; or that ministers themselves are ready to state explicitly, to the court of St. Petersburgh their ideas upon that subject. That there shall not be any question of etiquette whatever to impede this purpose, his Majesty's ministers are prepared