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IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT OF *GREAT BRITAIN & IRELAND.*

HOUSE OF COMMONS, MAY 19.

NEGOCIATION.

Mr. Grey said, that in consequence of the refusal of the right honourable gentleman (the Chancellor of the Exchequer) to grant the information for which he had applied yesterday, he now thought it his duty to bring forward a specific motion on the subject, and he was not sorry for the delay, as from the short attention he was able to bestow on the papers relative to the late negociation, which were yesterday laid before the house, he had discovered that there were many points in which the information they contained was defective. It was, therefore, his intention, in order to remove those defects, and to furnish the house with that ample knowledge which was necessary towards the complete comprehension of the important question that was to be discussed on Monday, to combine with the motion of which he had given notice yesterday, a number of other motions, in stating and commenting on which it was by no means his wish to say any thing that might go to pre-judge the subject of Monday's debate. He observed, that it was a very striking fact, that though in his majesty's declaration it was alledged that violence had been committed by the French upon the shipping and property of British subjects, yet it did not appear in the course of the papers yesterday presented, that any redress or satisfaction had been obtained on this point from the French government, nor indeed were the particular cases of violence at all described. This was one of the points on which he meant to make a motion, for if such violence had actually taken place, it was alone a just ground of war—it was so held by that house in the case of Nootka Sound. The first motion, therefore, he should make would be, that there should be laid before the house, an account of any acts of violence which had been committed by the French on any British vessels, or other property, from May 1802, to the 1st of March last, with copies of any representations that might have been made on the subject to the French government, together with the answers thereto. The other motions he proposed to submit to the house referred to the conduct of the several persons dispatched by France to the different ports of this country and Ireland, under the name of commercial commissioners, and the proceedings of our government thereon; the continuance of the French troops in Holland; the answers, if any obtained, to the remonstrances contained in the account of the negociations relative to Switzerland; the different orders given with regard to the Cape of Good Hope since the treaty of Amiens; the remarks made by our ministers upon some expressions in the declaration of the state of France, some time since published by the French government, with the replies thereto—He also wished that the house should be informed whether it was the fact, as generally understood, that Louisiana had been very lately ceded to America. This was material, as it made the relative situation of this country with France much more favorable to us, and was not less in a political than a commercial view of advantage to this country.—There were other articles of information which he felt to be highly necessary previous to the discussion of Monday, and he was happy to hear that an honorable member had given notice of motions for to-morrow respecting them. The hon. member now came to the motion of which he had given notice yesterday, with respect to the substance of the intelligence communicated to government as to the armaments in the ports of France and Holland, which were alluded to in his majesty's message to Parliament in the month of March last. The truth of this statement, it was desirable to ascertain, and he worded the motion so that it could not be liable to the common objection of an unwillingness to disclose private sources of information, as no names were called for. Upon this point there was not one tittle of information in the papers yesterday presented, except the absolute denial of that assertion by the French government, and the statement that they had at that time but two frigates on the coast of Holland, and three corvettes in the port of Dunkirk; such was the description of their considerable naval armament, which was made the ground of an alarming message to Parliament. Here the honourable member took occasion to allude to the observations made of late as to the situation of our navy; and as the friend of the first lord of the admiralty, whom he much admired, he desired an investigation of the subject. He was sure that noble lord was ready to meet it, and he was fully certain that he would disclaim the petty subterfuge taken by the right honorable gentleman on the treasury bench, as to the number of ships which were to be prepared at a short time after the commencement of war. If that noble lord promised fifty sail of the line, he surely could not be disposed to mean fifty hulks. However, he had no difficulty in saying, notwithstanding his regard for the general character of the noble President of the admiralty, that if we had not at present in the East and West-Indies, and in the Mediterranean, fleets more than sufficient to encounter any force which can be brought against us, that noble lord would deserve the severest punishment the country could inflict.—If so, and that our fleets were equally strong at home, and he had little doubt of the fact, we had nothing to apprehend from a military force which had not a fleet to convey it to any quarter where it might annoy us. After a short review of the several motions which he meant to submit to the house, remarking on the private instructions said to have been sent to citizen Faubert, the French commercial commissioner in Dublin, directing him to take the soundings of that harbour, and upon other parts; the account of the negociation, where no satisfactory explanation seemed to have been given by the French government, and where several instances of aggression occurred, any one of which quite insulated and unconnected with other proofs of a hostile mind, would have formed a legitimate ground of war. The honorable member reverted to the subject of the alledged armaments in the French and Dutch ports in March last. He quoted the precedents of the motions similar to that he now proposed, which had occured during the war of 1756, and also one in the year 1782, from the words of which he copied his motion.

The first motion as to the injury done to our shipping, with the remonstrances, &c. being put,

Lord Hawkesbury wished the house to be particularly impressed with the idea that the conduct of ministers in the course of the negociation was not actuated so much by a view of the facts alluded to by the honorable gentleman who had just sat down, or indeed by any single insulated act. They rested their justification on the production of a body of evidence, tending irresistibly to prove the existence of a hostile mind on the part of France. This he was delirous to mention, without meaning to pre-judge the question for discussion on Monday. The noble lord then went over and replied to the several points touched on by the honorable gentleman who spoke last. As to that which formed the subject of the motion now before the house, he explained how it was alluded to in his majesty's declaration, and contended that it was quite misunderstood by the honorable gentleman, for he appeared not to have made a just distinction between the not giving a just satisfaction, and the absolute refusal to do so. Had the latter been the case in any instance, particularly with respect to the security of our shipping; had such a refusal been made, either in the conversations of the first consul with our ambassador, or in any official communication, most undoubtedly ministers would have been bound to consider it as a ground for war; but no such thing had ever happened until the final conclusion of the negociation. To the hon. gentleman's first motion he should not object; but as to that which related to the commercial agents of France in this country, he observed, that the honorable gentleman had taken an exaggerated view of that subject. It was perfectly true that many such persons were sent into this country, but as they appeared in a capacity in which they could not be recognised, no commercial treaty being in existence between this country and France, he had no difficulty in saying that very few of them were suffered to go to the places of their destination, and upon suspicions arising as to the objects of their mission, representations were made to the French government, and several of them were recalled. As to the declaration of the first consul upon the state of France, which formed the third of the honorable member's motions, he would say, that though that paper presented a strong manifestation of a hostile mind in the French government, yet it was thought more consonant with the usual course of diplomatic transactions, to notice it only by directing our ambassador to refer to it upon any allusion being made in his intercourse with that government to the publication in England. Switzerland was the fourth point touched on by the hon. gentleman. In answer to the note verbale which his majesty's ministers had thought proper to present to the French government on that subject, they certainly did not receive a communication of the same kind with that given to Bavaria and other powers; but they were shewn by M. Otto an ostensible dispatch, in which was a solemn assurance that the first consul did not mean to invade the independence of Switzerland. How far that assurance had been observed, it was open to the house and to Europe to judge; but as to the dispatch itself, it was a copy of that which appeared about the same time in the Moniteur and other newspapers, under the title of a proclamation. To the hon. gentleman's motion respecting the Cape of Good Hope he had no objection, nor to that either which regarded the cession of Louisiana to America; for there was a document forthcoming on that transaction which had lately been presented to his majesty's ministers by the American ambassador, and which confirmed that important fact—a fact which, though it took place subsequent to the close of the negociation, was yet considerably promoted by our conduct during its progress. As to the motion respecting the French troops in Holland, he had to inform the honourable gentleman that no such representations had ever been made to the French government, as the honourable gentleman seemed to imagine. To the last motion of the honourable gentleman, relative to the intelligence received of the armaments referred to in his majesty's message in March last, he felt it his duty strongly to object, because he did not see any good that could result from the motion, nor any necessity that called for it, though he was aware of the evils which would result from such a disclosure of secret information, and those evils were very manifest, even from one of the precedents cited by the honourable gentleman, for the inconveniencies which arose from cases alluded to in 1754, cases not to be forgotten. The acquiescence of parliament in that motion served to break up a channel of private communication which was of the utmost importance to this country, and which had subsisted for years. Against such consequences the the house should be particularly guarded, and before such a danger were even risked, a very strong case indeed should be made out. He did not think the grounds stated by the honourable gentleman to be at all of that description, and therefore his motion could not be acceded to. It was not upon the armaments in the ports of France and Holland that his majesty's ministers meant to rely for the vindication of the message referred to by the honourable gentleman, but upon the whole tenor of the conduct which distinguished the French government, and which was sufficiently exposed in the papers presented yesterday. It was upon a series of circumstances tending to demonstrate a hostile purpose, which convinced ministers of the necessity for active preparation; for he begged to call to the minds of the house that his majesty's ministers were not the first to arm; the First Consul preceded them, and he prepared his troops with a view to those hostile objects which are alluded to in his conversation with our ambassador, and also, in his declaration addressed to the legislative body, which took place before the delivery of his majesty's message. He would ask whether, under such circumstances, ministers would have been highly culpable if they had neglected to put the country in a proper state of defence by calling out the militia, &c. and he would also ask, whether such steps of precaution could have been consistently taken: whether the militia could have been called out without a communication from his majesty to parliament? Such were the motives which dictated the communication of the 8th of March last, and to a combined view of all the existing circumstances, he trusted with confidence for the proof of its necessity, and for the justification of ministers.

Mr. Whitbread was sensible that the house must feel themselves much indebted to his honourable friend for the motions he had this day brought forward, as they must afford to the house an opportunity of obtaining more ample and satisfactory information respecting the great question which was so soon to come under their consideration. The honourable gentleman then followed up the arguments urged by his honorable friend (Mr. Grey); he insisted that if offensive expressions had been made use of by the First Consul in his communication to the legislative body, ministers had failed in their duty at the time in not calling for an explanation of those expressions. Ministers had also laid much stress on the mission of the commercial agents into the more considerable sea-port towns of the empire, and of the views and projects which they were commissioned to prosecute. But the noble lord confessed that this cause of complaint had been done away; for on a representation of it to general Andreossi, those agents who had already arrived were sent away, and the arrival of those who were preparing to come over was suspended. This, in his mind, was a satisfactory explanation upon that point. As to the case of Switzerland, the *note verbale* upon that point was communicated both to the ministers of our government, and to those of the other governments of Europe.—But there was another point upon which the house must undoubted be anxious to obtain some information. The point he alluded to was, what communications, if any, had taken place since the departure of lord Whitworth from Paris, between Mr. Talbot and the French government. In the present state of the country, surely no information could be more material or more requisite for the house to be in possession of before they came to any decision on the great question. Now as to the more immediate object of his honourable friend's motion, viz. the obtaining information respecting the armaments, their extent, destination, &c. &c. said to be carrying on in the ports of France and Holland, he was at a loss to discover what danger could be apprehended from granting such information as was called for, especially in the shape in which it was moved for by his honourable friend. His hon. friend called only for the substance of that information, but it was objected to on the ground of its being dangerous to cut off the sources of such intelligence. But the house would, no doubt, recollect the difference in such cases between a time of war and a time of peace. In time of war it might be difficult to obtain information, and dangerous even to communicate the substance of it; but in time of peace, as was stated by the right honourable gentleman (the chancellor of the exchequer), in time of profound peace, when access was open to every Englishman to visit what parts of France he thought proper, to inspect the ports of Boulogne, Dunkirk, Cherburgh, &c. &c. how could any objection be made to granting the substance of any information that might be communicated at such a period? and indeed if any danger was to arise to the persons who made the communication from the substance of the information being laid before the House, would they not be exposed to that danger from the very fact of that information being alluded to in his Majesty's message? Besides, ministers, by the message they brought down from his majesty, intimated a near and great alarm; and by founding this alarm they shut the mouth of the house, and called on parliament to leave their conduct, under such circumstances, free and unembarrassed.—They represented the preparations in the ports of France and Holland as not intended for colonial purposes; and that during a negociation it was proper to take every precaution against their being intended for any hostile project. They might have in view an invasion of this country. But in the whole course of the negociation, and on the face of the papers laid before the House, there was not a single word to prove a meditation of such designs. It was a mere assertion on the part of ministers, and that assertion was flatly denied by the French government. But ministers say they are responsible; if so, let them not shrink from granting the information called for, and let the house go into an examination of their conduct on Monday, with all the evidence before them which can possibly be adduced to explain and clear up their conduct.

Lord Castlereagh contended that the very aspect of the armaments carrying on in the ports of France and Holland rendered it a duty on Ministers to bring down a message of the nature of that which had been delivered to the House in the month of March. At first it was notorious that a great expedition was preparing in the ports of Holland for Louisiana. The message did not assert that this expedition was intended to act hostilely against this country; it merely stated the fact, that such an armament existed pending a negociation, and that, combined with the subsisting negociation, it was the duty of ministers to make a communication of it to the House. Nor was it only the armament at Helvoetsluys that government had to attend to; if due attention was paid to what was observed by the First Consul himself, it was evident that apprehensions might also be rationally entertained of the armaments fitted out at Toulon and other of the southern ports of France, said to be intended for St. Domingo, but which afforded the facility of invading Egypt, if such had been the First Consul's wish and design—were not these then just subjects of alarm? To these armaments might be added another fitted out at Brest for the East Indies, all of which, when combined together, afforded ample room for precaution, and for well grounded apprehension; and unless a message was bro't down to Parliament expressive of these apprehensions, how could the militia have been called out either in this country and in Ireland, in which latter parts of the United Empire, such serious alarms were to be apprehended? It was therefore, no doubt, the duty of ministers to provide for every exigency. But on all these points his noble friend has enlarged with so much perspicuity, that it was superfluous for him to travel over the same ground. As to the question put by the hon. gentleman—whether Mr. Talbot had not had further communication with the French government after Lord Whitworth had quitted Paris? He had only to say, that no further attempt had been made to carry on the negociation after the departure of his Lordship, and that Mr. Talbot was only employed to wait on M. Talleyrand, while Lord Whitworth was still at Paris; nothing had been done subsequent to his leaving that city. When the whole of this important matter came to be more fully and minutely discussed, whatever might be the opinion of the House on its ultimate result, he was confident that on one point they would be unanimous, viz. that ministers never betrayed any wish to conceal their conduct; but on the contrary, were anxious to submit it to the severest Parliamentary ordeal.

Mr. Whitbread and Lord Hawkesbury said a few words in explanation.

Mr. Windham supported the motion of the hon. gentleman who introduced the discussion with his usual force and energy. He conceived that one important point of information had been already gained by the discussion, and that the declaration of ministers that no information had been communicated. A good deal of argument had been employed respecting those persons whom, under the character of Commercial Commissioners, the French government had chosen to send into this country. It was not enough that remonstrances had been employed by ministers, and that in consequence of these remonstrances they were forced to withdraw. The House had a right to know on what grounds they were in the first instance received into the country, for after they were admitted it was no sufficient cure for the evils which their appearance might have created that they should be dismissed from the kingdom. It was a matter of very serious consideration that, in time of peace, a set of men had appeared in this country possessed of no definite character, but under the pretence of acting as Commercial Agents in the absence of any treaty of commerce, acted as spies, and employed themselves in collecting information hereafter to be employed in facilitating any plans of national annoyance. The House were entitled to know whether this has ever been a ground of remonstrance on the part of ministers, and in what manner these remonstrances had been received by the French government. But, passing from this point, the hon. member adverted particularly to the subject of the armaments, as described in his Majesty's message delivered in March. When peace or war was to be founded on these armaments, it was no matter of light consideration. It had been said by a Noble Lord (Lord Castlereagh) that armaments were nothing independent of circumstances. With this opinion he perfectly coincided. But it was not to be forgotten that in circumstances there was nothing of peculiar alarm independent of armaments. The great question to be considered, was, whether the armaments were such as might in all cases be expected to exist, extended as the military force of France now was; or whether they were armaments which might be pointed to any specific object, or made the ground of any peculiar alarm?—The hon. gentleman, with great acuteness, illustrated his argument on this point; he saw no reasonable argument against the motion for ascertaining on what grounds ministers had stated the existence of the military preparations in the ports of Holland and France,

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