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IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT.

House of Commons.

Monday, April 23.

Motion on the Defence of the *NATION.*

[Mr. PITT's Speech Concluded.]

Our great naval arſenals, and thoſe places which are moſt contiguous to our principal ma[illegible]ctories, ought of courſe to be the firſt object of government, in ſettling the relative proportion of volunteers, which the ſeveral diſtricts ſhould be allowed to furniſh—allowed I call it, for it was at the diſcretion of government to accept the ſervices of many corps which they rejected, and generally without any reference to the conſideration of local defence which I have mentioned. When they thought proper to limit the volunteers to ſix times the number of the militia, and for what reaſon I cannot divine, they had put Staffordſhire and Derbyſhire quite on a par with the maritime countries; no diſtinction was made in favour of thoſe diſtricts which lie moſt convenient to the enemy's coaſt, and which are moſt likely to be the firſt points of attack.—Can any man ſay that there was any thing like policy in ſuch an arrangement, or that indeed there is to be found in any part of the ſtructure or execution of the volunteer ſyſtem, ſo far as Miniſters are concerned, that which can deſerve the character of diſcretion, or the approval of a ſtateſman? There was, in fact, no part of the conduct purſued by Government towards the volunteers which did not form ſome ground for complaint, which did not offer ſome evidence of wavering and inconſiſtency. The Houſe witneſſed the part they took at the cloſe of the laſt ſeſſion, when an hon. gentleman on the other ſide (Mr. Sheridan) undertook to panegyriſe the zeal and gallantry of the volunteers. When that hon. gentleman, two days before the ſeſſion cloſed, thought proper, and, in the opinion of many intelligent reſpectable members, very prematurely, to move a vote of thanks to the volunteers, he ſtated that ſuch vote was not only a juſt acknowledgement for the patriotiſm, they, who were then embodied had manifeſted, but that it would operate to encourage further voluntary offers of ſervice.—Miniſters applauded warmly the motion of the hon. gentleman, but how did they afterwards act? The hon. gentleman moved at the ſame time that there ſhould be laid before the Houſe, at its meeting after the receſs, a liſt of ſuch new corps as ſhould volunteer; but there was another liſt which the hon. gentleman neglected to move for, namely, of all the corps which ſhould be reduced or rejected in the ſame interval (a laugh). Had the hon. gentleman done ſo, he would have ſeen what uſe had been made of his motion, for the firſt ſtep taken by miniſters almoſt immediately after its adoption was to ſuſpend the progreſs of that voluntary zeal which the hon. gentleman, in common with every man who valued the character and ſafety of the country, ſo much admired. Miniſters determined at once, that the Volunteers ſhould not be increaſed any further, but that, on the contrary, their numbers ſhould be diminiſhed. The notice of this determination was ſpeedily circulated among the volunteers, accompanied by the hon. gentleman's vote of thanks. Thus the volunteers were complimented for that which government at the ſame time told them they did not wiſh for, they would not accept. There is a word in French, REMERCIER, which litterally implies returning thanks for proffered ſervices, which it is not intended to accept, and this word has cloſe analogy to the conduct of miniſters in the communication of the motion of thanks, which they agreed in, in company with the reſolution which I have already mentioned. In regard to the enrolment of volunteer corps, ſo far as ſuch enrolment is connected with the proviſions of the defence act, I muſt again repeat the complaint I have often made, of the total remiſſion of government to execute the powers veſted in it by that act, and any difficulties that have ariſen in the progreſs of the ballot, I do conceive to be attributable to the non-exerciſe of the power I have referred to. As to the refuſal of adequate pecuniary military aid to the volunteers, I muſt obſerve, that it is amongſt the moſt culpable and inconſiſtent part of the conduct of miniſters. Without going minutely into the conſequences of ſuch conduct, which it would be more convenient to detail in the propoſed committee, I have, only at preſent to remark, that whatever difference of opinion may exiſt between my hon. friend on the lower bench (Mr. Windham) and me, with reſpect to the volunteers, and the practicability of rendering them perfect in military diſcipline, there can be no difference between us as to this point, that they ought to be furniſhed with the beſt inſtruction that is attainable, and both he and I have a right to to complain of miniſters in not following up their own principle, by giving the neceſſary aid, to promote the improvement of the volunteers. My hon. friend has always maintained that the volunteers cannot be rendered equal to, or fit to act with regular troops; but miniſters have uniformly reſiſted this opinion. Why then have they not provided adequately for the execution of their own ideas? No, they have only allowed pay for 20 days in a year, although in the opinion of all military men, no new raiſed regiment of the regular army, with all the advantages of ſubordination, martial law, &c. could be diſciplined fit for ſervice in leſs than ſix weeks or 2 months. Will any man ſay that ſo ſhort a period ſhould be deemed ſufficient for the diſcipline of the volunteers? But I ſhall be told probably that it was expected the volunteers would, independently of the 20 days, attend to drill on every Sunday. If they were, I ſhould maintain, that, Sundays included, the time was not ſufficient to inſtruct them, and ſhould not be relied on in the exiſting circumſtanses of the country, when we were daily menaced with invaſion, that invaſion which miniſters have been perpetually telling us was daily to be expected ſince the middle of laſt ſummer.—Notwithſtanding this apprehenſion, ſuch has been the behaviour of miniſters, that I much fear if the enemy ſhould not attack us until even the middle of next ſummer, he would find the volunteers very imperfectly diſciplined. I cannot help expreſſing my ſurpriſe that miniſters ſhould have even ſeriouſly calculated upon the probability that the labouring claſſes, of whom ſo many of the volunteers conſiſt, would be ſo prompt to devote the only day they have for recreation and repoſe to the ſtudy of military diſcipline. It certainly did not betray any policy of conſideration ſo to calculate; but even ſuppoſing they were ſo to aſſemble, and alſo to attend the twenty days, how were they to attain the inſtruction deſired from the preſent mode, & from that which has prevailed uniformly? I ſuggeſted to miniſters a plan of inſtruction, which I was told ſhould be conſidered; but as they have never yet acted upon it, nor appear at all to conſider it, their promiſe of conſideration upon this, as well as upon other points, reminds me of a practice in the Legiſlative Aſſembly of a neighbouring nation (the United States of Holland,) in which, when it was determined to get rid of a queſtion, the reſolution was *ad-referendum*, which meant to take no more notice of it. The nature of the project I thought it my duty to recommend to Miniſters, related particularly to that which I have often mentioned in this Houſe. For the advancement of the diſcipline of the volunteers, the neceſſity of appointing Adjutants to a certain number of men. This has been in part acceded to, but in what manner? An Adjutant is appointed to ſuch corps only as amount to 400 men, & to them only in caſe they exerciſe 80 days in the year, although the men are allowed pay but for 20 days. Where, I would put it to the common ſenſe of any man, can be found a ſtronger inſtance of weakneſs and inconſiſtency than this order furniſhes? No proviſion is made for the pay of the Adjutant unleſs the corps exerciſe 80 days, for one fourth of which only the men are made any allowance. Is not this alone enough to expoſe the mind of miniſters; to ſhew their unacquaintance with the means of executing their own purpoſes? Indeed, I am perfectly convinced of their want of vigour; every circumſtance ſerves to ſhew it, and I have therefore the ſtrongeſt conviction upon my mind that they are incapable of acting upon any thing like ſyſtem, of adopting or executing well digeſted or energetic plans for the defence of the country. I do not of courſe place any hope on their exertions, and, therefore, concur in the propriety of the propoſed committee, where every queſtion connected with our ſecurity may be fully inveſtigated. One reaſon I recollect, for ſo tardily adopting the plan for the appointment of Adjutants was, the difficulty of procuring Officers from the line to fill thoſe ſtations. I recommended that Serjeant Majors ſhould be choſen; but to this I was told that Serjeant Majors could not be perſuaded to give up their ſituations for ſuch Adjutancies, unleſs they were allowed half pay. I ſaw no good reaſon for declining to make this allowance, and I therefore, adviſed it in December laſt. I was promiſed that the ſubject would be taken into conſideration. I afterwards applied in March to know the reſult of the conſideration, but I was told that no deciſion was made, and I underſtand it is undecided ſtill, while the diſcipline of the volunteers does and has for months back ſo imperatively called for an immediate deciſion reſpecting it, although this was one of the defects in the volunteer ſyſtem which government promiſed to cure. When before laſt Chriſtmas an application was made to Miniſters with regard to the confuſion which prevailed among the volunteers, the gentlemen who applied were deſired to wait until after the Chriſtmas receſs, when a digeſted plan would be brought forward by miniſters which ſhould remove and prevent the recurrence of the evils complained of and communicate to the volunteer ſyſtem all the perfection of which it was ſuſceptible. This digeſted plan has been laid before the houſe, and at length made its way, after various alterations through it.

Thoſe alterations were added to the Houſe of Lords; and now it is returned to us, there is ſcarcely one feature remaining of the original meaſure—of the well digeſted plan of miniſters. The ſuggeſtion made to them by others, they reluctantly adopted, and the object of thoſe ſuggeſtions they in ſome inſtances have almoſt defeated, as in the caſe of inviting the volunteers to permanent duty, and applying the guinea propoſed to be given them as bounty, which is to be diſtributed in ſuch a way as to hold out no inducement to the men or benefit to their families. Miniſters have been equally injudicious in every other project of defence, from the army of reſerve to the enrolment of claſſes under the General Defence Act—an act which I had the honor of a large ſhare in ſuggeſting, and I lament much that miniſters did not adopt it at a more early period; but the fact is, that ſo far from miniſters having ſpontaneouſly taken any vigorous proceeding for the defence of the country ſince the commencement of the war, I ſtate broadly that no part of the meaſures for the increaſe of our military eſtabliſhment has originated with them, (a cry of hear! hear! in which the Chancellor of the Exchequer joined)—Mr. Pitt proceeded. If, ſaid he, the right hon. gentleman means to deny my aſſertion, I ſhall appeal to the recollection of the Houſe, whether in June laſt, when the army eſtimates were under diſcuſſion, I did not aſk the right hon. Secretary at War, (Mr. Bragge) after he had finiſhed his ſtatement—I did not aſk if what he had mentioned comprehended all the proviſion that miniſters meant to make for the defence of the country? To this I was anſwered in the affirmative; and I accordingly gave notice of my intention to ſubmit a meaſure founded on the ſame principle with that of the army of reſerve. Any benefit that may have reſulted from that meaſure, is not, I aſſert, attributable to miniſters, who were quite at a loſs what courſe to take—who knew not, in fact, what meaſures were applicable to the dangers of the country. I will not dwell on the execution of the army of reſerve act, as I ſhall go into that ſubject very fully on Wedneſday next, and if I ſhould not then have the good fortune of perſuading the Houſe to accede to the propoſition which I would wiſh to have ingrafted on the army of reſerve bill, in order to provide a conſtant and regular ſupply of recruits for our regular army, I ſhall feel an advantage in the exiſtence of ſuch a committee as the motion before the Houſe propoſes to eſtabliſh, as I may thus have an opportunity of again preſſing the project upon the conſideration of the Houſe—a project which, if I am able to demonſtrate its practicability for great objects in view, I am ſure that every man will feel it to be deſirable, and all will be ready to give it their concurrence. If I can ſhew that even a ſmall increaſe can be derived from this project to our regular army, it is impoſſible to doubt, that any will refuſe his ſupport. The mode propoſed by miniſters to raiſe an addition to the regular army, to ſupply the ſuſpenſion of the army of reſerve, I confeſs I cannot underſtand. They have not ſtated any inducement to men to enliſt beyond eight guineas bounty, and how they can procure them for ſuch a ſum, while thirty guineas and more are given for militia ſubſtitutes, it is difficult to imagine; unleſs the intention be, that which no one has yet avowed, becauſe all have been unanimous in condemning the practice, viz. that of raiſing men for rank. It may be ſaid that this practice has prevailed when I was in power, but then the experience of that practice, afforded a complete warning againſt it. I am quite ready to declare, that I am ſorry for the ſhare I had in that meaſure, and experience convinces me, that it ought never again to be reſorted to. Other gentlemen have appeared, and profeſſed to be equally adverſe to that meaſure, and their minds muſt be of a ſtrange character, if what they have obſerved is not ſufficient to diſſuade them from it. Nothing can be more abſurd than to ſuppoſe, that if they perſiſted in the old and ſcandalous practice of crimping, all its attendant frauds and impoſitions will not return; and it is equally abſurd to fancy, that only eight guineas bounty will be given.—Why not let the army of reſerve go on along with this new plan, whatever it may be? If officers are to run a race together for rank, as I underſtand they are, for, although the intention is not avowed in this Houſe by miniſters, applications are known to be made to and by ſeveral officers: why take away the completion of the army of reſerve.

I cannot conceive any thing more irrational. When a new mode of raiſing recruits for the regular army is propoſed it naturally brings to my mind an opinion which is much diſputed and upon which, becauſe it is ſo diſputed by ſome great military authorities, I cannot preſume to pronounce a decided ſentiment, I mean the propriety of raiſing men for limited ſervice in point, although I certainly ſhould think it the more eligible policy, and beſt calculated to render the army reſpectable and efficient.—However military objections as to the difficulty, if ſuch a ſyſtem exiſted, of ſupplying our foreign ſtations, muſt be overcome before the ſyſtem be attempted. As to the plan for bringing the Iriſh militia over here, I do not approve of it under exiſting circumſtances. No argument can be drawn in favour of ſuch a plan at preſent, from a precedent which occurred in quite a different ſituation of things. With reſpect to the interchange of the militia of the two countries, there are many phyſical objections to it that would render it a meaſure very diſagreeable to the officers connected with both militias; and here I muſt notice a rumour which has gone abroad, that applications have been lately made to the privates of the Weſt Kent militia, without the knowledge of their officers, to volunteer their ſervices for Ireland; this practice deſerves to be ſtrongly reprobated. What, to try to prevail on men to quit their own coaſt within half a day's ſail of the enemy, to proceed to the diſtance of Ireland. The hon. mover of the propoſition under debate has alluded in the courſe of his ſpeech to the power which in my opinion belongs to the Crown, to call out the population of the country in the event of an invaſion, as expreſſed in the preamble to the General Defence Act, I perceive, that the hon. gentleman's ſentiment differs from mine. I do not mean to diſcuſs this ſubject at preſent; but I muſt obſerve, that nothing appears clearer to me than this propoſition, that the ſtate has a right to call on the people to defend it, and that in the Crown, being the depoſitary of the power of the ſtate, is veſted the right of ſo calling out the people upon a great emergency. This right I think, I could ſhew from a ſeries of precedents, to be recognized by the conſtitution and cuſtom of this country; that it is a right inherent in the Crown to exerciſe this power according to the neceſſity of ſuch caſe as may ariſe, and to be limited by that neceſſity. The Crown, it muſt be admitted, poſſeſſes the power of putting any diſtrict of the kingdom under martial law, in caſe of invaſion; ſubject, however, to that reſponſibility to which miniſters would be liable for the abuſe of any ſuch power. The right hon. gentleman took a view of the propoſition of the hon. mover, reſpecting an armed peaſantry. Of this meaſure he approved, but not univerſally. If it were adopted in ſome counties on the coaſt, ſuch as Kent, Suſſex, Eſſex, Suffolk, Devonſhire, part of Yorkſhire, and other places, which might be conſidered in the propoſed committee, he thought it would be unneceſſary to reſort to it in the inland counties. It was remarkable, he obſerved, that no orders had yet been ſent to the Lords Lieutenants of the different counties, to make out the claſſification or enrolment of the ſeveral males capable of bearing arms in their reſpective diſtricts. This furniſhed another inſtance of the neglect of miniſters. After recapitulating the different grounds of his objections to miniſters, the right hon. gentleman took notice of the ſtate of the navy, in which he obſerved the very gun-brigs which he recommended on a former occaſion, were now building with all poſſible diſpatch, although when he recommended them he was condemned to ſuffer ſome obloquy and even ridicule, which officers were brought from diſtant commands to aſſiſt in promoting. (A cry of hear! hear! from the oppoſition benches.)—He proceeded to comment on the neglect of the fortifications ſo often pointed out as neceſſary on particular parts of the coaſt, when the expenditure of a few thouſand pounds might prevent the employment and ſave the lives of many thouſand men. In alluding to the neglect he did not wiſh to be underſtood as at all ſaying any thing of the commander in chief or the maſter-general of the ordnance. He deſired to ſpeak only of the cabinet. With them reſted the reſponſibility—to them attached the duty of providing for every part of the public defence. In concluſion, the right hon. gentleman ſtated that, judging of miniſters from what they had done and what they had omitted to do—from their ſlowneſs to adopt and their incapacity to act upon any vigorous plan for the public defence—from the very long conſideration they required upon even the moſt trifling topics, and the very crude and ill-digeſted meaſures they, notwithſtanding, uniformly brought forward—from all thoſe conſiderations, he felt himſelf urged by a ſtrong ſenſe of duty to the Houſe, his country and his ſovereign, to vote for the appointment of a committee to conſider of deviſing ſome effectual means for our protection, and for the ſecurity of all that a great nation could hold to be valuable. The opinion he gave on this occaſion he wiſhed to be quite undiſguiſed, and truſted that it was not likely to be conſidered, as lightly taken up, but rather that the reaſons he had ſtated were amply ſufficient to ſuſtain and juſtify it.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer explained, and ſtated, that he had not ſaid, as imputed to him by the right honorable gentleman who had juſt ſat down, that it was not within the power of parliament to inſtitute ſuch a committee as was propoſed. It muſt be in the recollection of the Houſe that he admitted the competence of parliament, although he doubted its inclination to appoint ſuch a committee.

Mr. Secretary YORKE ſaid, that it was not his intention to follow the right hon. gentleman through his extremely long, brilliant and powerful ſpeech. Though many arguments and facts had been urged by the right hon. gentleman which went to infer a culpable conduct on the part of miniſters, of which, if guilty, he was ready to admit the right hon. gentleman would have abundant reaſon for making them the ſubject of a criminal charge againſt them, he could not allow that they fell properly to be diſcuſſed under the preſent motion. The motion of the hon. gentleman was for a committee of the Houſe of a two fold nature. Firſt, it embraced the conſideration of the acts already in force for the defence of the country; and in the ſecond place, it called on the Houſe to adopt ſuch other means as it might judge proper, with a view to render the ſyſtem of defence complete. How is it poſſible to go into a conſideration of the latter object, without calling before the Houſe all the military and naval officers in the ſervice—without calling for all the plans of operation, and for all the diſcuſſions which had taken place relative to the modes of defence to be adopted, ſo as to enable them to form a reaſonable judgment on the ſubject? He did ſay that they might not have reaſon to go into the committee, but he was convinced that at preſent ſuch a committee would be extremely inconvenient, and ſhould not be gone into unleſs on ſtrong grounds. Now, what were the grounds? There was nothing in our ſituation ſo melancholy—nothing in the want of defence of the country which could warrant ſuch a ſtep. The neceſſity of the meaſure muſt therefore originate in ſome great neglect of miniſters—ſome diſcontent in the country—ſomething in the meaſures of government ſo incongruous, as to require inveſtigation. Had any miſfortune, however occurred? Had any advantage been gained by the enemy in conſequence of our want of defence?—Certainly not.——That part of the ſubject, therefore, he ſhould diſmiſs.—Did then any diſcontent exiſt in any part of the country! If ſo, he ſhould be glad to hear it ſtated. He knew that ſome diſcontent did exiſt in that Houſe,