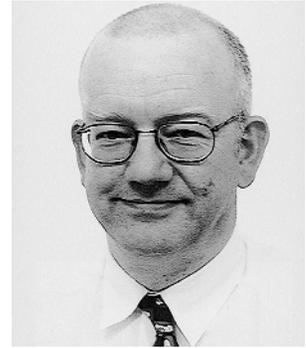




DECEMBER 2004



A Man to Remember

June 4, 2004, was a significant date for all who care for the history and cause of human liberty. It marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of a great champion of freedom, a man who wrought a revolution not only in his own land but worldwide. The man was Richard Cobden.

Born in Sussex in modest circumstances, Cobden became a successful businessman as a calico printer after his move to Manchester, the city with which his name is forever associated. In 1837 he made his first mark in politics when he started a successful campaign to incorporate Manchester as a self-governing borough and abolish the feudal rule of the manorial court. However, his great contribution to liberty really began the following year.

At that time Britain's political and economic order, while more liberal than most, was still clearly a part of the *ancien régime*. The central institution was a system of agricultural protection known as the Corn Laws. Passed at various times and consolidated after 1815, these prohibited the import of grain unless the price of domestically grown produce passed a certain level. The effect was to artificially support the price of domestic grain and its products, such as bread. This transferred income from the masses to agricultural producers. The poor were particularly hard hit, since bread was the main part of their diet.

The great winners were not tenant farmers but large landlords. The Corn Laws were the centerpiece of duties on a wide range of commodities and products, which provided the greater part of government revenue. This revenue in turn supported the system of "Old Corruption" in which benefits and favors went to the elite as pensions, sinecures, and lucrative posts.

The Corn Laws also had far-reaching international effects. By closing British markets to farmers in France and Germany, they impoverished producers there and so reduced the market for British manufactured goods. The laws were a classic example of "class legislation."

Much modern political science would suggest that nothing could be done about this. The costs of the Corn Laws were spread among many people, the majority of whom could not even vote. The benefits were highly concentrated in a class that had a predominant position in the political system. This, one might think, would make anything beyond marginal change impossible. Cobden and others thought otherwise.

On the September 24, 1838, seven local men met at a Manchester hotel and formed an organization to campaign for the repeal of the Corn Laws. Cobden was unable to attend because he was in Germany, but he joined on his return, along with his close friend John Bright, and they became the acknowledged leaders of the movement. The Anti-Corn-Law League, as it came to be known, soon was the most effective popular political movement Britain had seen. With

Stephen Davies (steve365@btinternet.com) is a senior lecturer in history at Manchester Metropolitan University in England.

headquarters in Manchester and branches all over the country, it used the recently introduced penny post and the railroads to launch a national campaign. Only eight years later, in 1846, Parliament voted to repeal the Corn Laws.

Several points can be made about the methods and arguments of Cobden and his colleagues. Their demands were radical and intransigent. From the start Cobden and the others refused to adopt a piecemeal strategy or to settle for partial reform. Instead they demanded the “Immediate and Total Repeal of the Corn Laws.” Their aim was not to lobby the political class but to pressure it by transforming public opinion. This meant that their legislative victory had far-reaching long-term effects. For almost a hundred years it was political suicide to stand on a protectionist platform in Britain.

Emphasis on Liberty and Justice

Although economic arguments played a large part in the campaign, its main thrust was ideological and emphasized liberty and justice. Again, this meant that the League was able to change public opinion in a fundamental way, not simply on one policy issue. Above all, an explicit connection was made between free trade and peace. This was of central importance to Cobden, who was an ardent opponent of militarism, war, and an aggressive foreign policy. (He also strongly opposed British imperialism.)

Cobden’s career after 1846 has received less attention but was still highly significant. Elected to Parliament in 1841, he was defeated in the election of 1857 because of his opposition to the Crimean War and Palmerston’s foreign policy. He was an active campaigner for a number of causes, including parliamentary reform, but above all the international peace movement. Cobden was a per-

sistent critic of high levels of military spending and also of government economic regulation. He argued for low taxes, limited government, and a pacific foreign policy.

His other great achievement was, along with the French liberal Michel Chevalier, to negotiate the free-trade treaty of 1860 between Britain and France, which brought an end to centuries of trade barriers between the two countries and applied the principle of free trade to a greater part of the world than at any time before in history.

His career had permanent effects both in Britain and elsewhere. Following the move to free trade, there was a long trade-driven boom, which brought about a dramatic increase in living standards in many countries. Contrary to the arguments of his opponents (repeated by many today who should know better), there was both a reduction in the price of food and an increase in wages. The fiscal basis of the British state was transformed, and by 1870 almost all the duties had been swept away and the size of the government’s share of national income reduced. Cobden did not win the argument over imperialism but held the government to account, and there were enough supporters of his argument to make any government cautious until the revival of imperialism and jingoism later in the nineteenth century.

Richard Cobden died in 1865. The causes for which he fought, sadly, still need campaigners of his kind. Free trade among all of the people of the world, peaceful relations and reduction of armaments, the diminution of the power of governments, and opposition to imperialism and chauvinism are all issues where intellectual and political battle is joined. His arguments and success should be an inspiration to us today, as should be the way he conducted his campaign, passionately and with conviction but without rancor. □