

**AN INQUIRY INTO THE CAUSES  
OF THE PRESENT DISTRESS: WITH  
AN ATTEMPT TO EXPLAIN THE  
THEORY OF NATIONAL WEALTH**

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An inquiry into the causes of the present distress: with an attempt to explain the theory of National Wealth by William Reid

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BY WILLIAM REID.



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## AN INQUIRY.

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WHEN a spirit of political discontent becomes general in a nation, it may be taken as an infallible evidence that distress, the fruitful parent of political dissatisfaction, is widely diffused among the people. It is contrary, indeed, to every acknowledged principle of human nature, to believe that when people are prosperous they should be dissatisfied with their political state, or desirous of political change. So far from being desirous of political change, should any innovation be attempted by their rulers in such circumstances, the people would, almost to a certainty, resist it to the utmost of their power. It is not meant, however, to be contended that people are happy and contented exactly in proportion to the degree of prosperity which they enjoy. On the contrary, the prosperous are, as a class, perhaps, the most discontented; but then it is not political discontent with which they are disquieted. Their minds may be, and, when not properly regulated, no doubt are racked by envy of others more prosperous than themselves, as well as by all the selfish and hateful passions of which prosperity, like a hot-bed, raises so luxuriant a crop in a debased mind and depraved heart; but as subjects, with the trifling exception of the very small number who are under the dominion of an inordinate ambition, they are not only contented themselves, but, being extremely apprehensive of change, they are too apt to believe that the cry

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of distress raised by their suffering fellow-subjects is greatly exaggerated, if not altogether feigned, and to aid the government in the vain attempt to stifle it by force.

Now it is unfortunately undeniable that, in this country, at the present time, political discontent is not only general, but is continuing to spread rapidly, and threatens soon to become nearly universal. Though we had no other evidence, therefore, that distress among the great body of the people is general, and continuing to increase, this of itself should open the eyes of the Government to the danger of our present situation, and incite it to adopt the most prompt and efficient measures for ascertaining the causes of the present distress, and for alleviating it as far as possible. To disregard it were as foolish as for men, seated on a volcano, to disregard the muttering of the hidden fires which precede and announce the eruption which will hurl them into destruction.

Apart, however, from such indirect evidence of the existence of general distress, there is the most unexceptionable direct testimony that several of the great interests of the nation are in a deplorable state. We have the authority of Lord Althorp, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, himself a considerable landed proprietor, and from the great interest which he takes in agricultural affairs perhaps better qualified to give an opinion on the subject than any other individual in the nation, "that the landed interest is in a worse situation than any other."<sup>\*</sup> By this, we only understand that it is in a very bad state; for it is with classes as with individuals, when any of them is suffering, as each knows its own grievances best, it invariably thinks its own state worst. This evidence is corroborated by that of Mr. Richards, an eminent merchant, who "could say, from his knowledge as a merchant, that the capital of the middle classes was wofully diminished, and that it continued to diminish, and he was convinced that, if something were not done, it must end in ruin."<sup>†</sup> When two of the great interests of the nation are thus admitted to be in such a deplorable state by members of their own body, one of them a Minister of the Crown, whose

<sup>\*</sup> Parliamentary Debates; Mr. Attwood's Motion, 23d April, 1833. <sup>†</sup> *Ibid.*



moral fortitude in making such a statement does him infinite honour, there can be no question, that if the labouring classes had had a representative of their own body in Parliament to have spoken from experience of their state, his evidence would have been equally conclusive as to the existence of general and severe distress amongst them. Indeed, to any person acquainted with the first principles of Political Economy, it must appear obviously impossible that, when the two former classes are in distress, the third can be in a prosperous state, because the third depends upon the other two for its employment; and it were as rational to expect that when the master of a family is suffering from poverty and distress, the servants employed by him should be in a comparative state of ease and comfort, as that the labouring classes can be prosperous when landlords and capitalists are in misery.

It is true, no doubt, that the existence of any general and unusual distress was denied, in the course of the same debates, by more than one member of Parliament, one of them holding a high office under the Government, and who, to say the least of it, ought to have been more guarded than to employ such irritating expressions: for nothing has a greater tendency to drive a suffering people to despair than denying the existence of that distress which they know from sad experience to be too true, as it at once shuts out all hope of relief. To enter into any lengthened examination of these statements here is as unnecessary as it would be irksome, as their effects were completely neutralized by being coupled with the utterly incredible assertion, that the country is in a more prosperous state now than it had been for a great length of time—an assertion which is contradicted, it is believed, by the experience of ninety-nine out of every one hundred individuals in the nation. What their idea of national prosperity may be, it would perhaps be difficult to tell. It was alleged by the witty Fielding, that "Murder! Robbery! Rape! are used by ladies in a fright, as fa, la, la, ra, da, &c., are in music, only as the vehicles of sound, and without any fixed ideas." Perhaps "Prosperity and Wealth" are used by our dilettanti Political Economists in Parliament in much the same way; or it may be, that we are not yet sufficiently initiated into

the mysteries of this profound science, to understand how a nation can be in a state of increased prosperity, when the great body of the people are in a state of increasing misery and destitution.

Indeed, though we were to take for granted all that these advocates for prosperity ask, far from proving that the country is in a state of increased prosperity, it would only prove, that the distress has shifted the utmost severity of its pressure from the labouring to the middle classes. Now, as it were but poor consolation to a patient writhing under the pangs of rheumatism, to be told by his physician that another was suffering severer torture in the agonies of the stone, so, we fear, it can scarcely afford much comfort to the labouring classes to know that the middle classes are, comparatively speaking, suffering more severely than themselves. The labouring classes, who are seldom for any length of time more than three or four degrees above starvation point, have perhaps only fallen two or three degrees, or to within one degree of that point, at or below which they cannot permanently continue, while the middle classes have fallen from the genial summer-heat of comfort some twenty degrees or so, to the cheerless temperature of privation of nearly all the comforts, if not of some of the necessaries of life. To those, indeed, among the labouring classes who have accurate notions of their own situation, this, so far from affording them consolation, must add greatly to their sufferings, as it must convince them that any improvement in their circumstances is all but hopeless.

Instead, then, of denying the existence of a distress which is vouched by several millions of witnesses, it would have been much better had these individuals directed their best attention to discover its causes, and exerted their utmost efforts for its removal, if possible, or, at all events, for its alleviation. A calm, dispassionate, and impartial inquiry into the causes of the present distress has become indispensably necessary, not only because it is utterly impossible that things can go on much longer in their present state, but also because it is evident that a mutual delusion pervades alike the Government and the people. The people, in utter ignorance of the real causes of their suffer-

ings, unreasonably attributing all their distress solely to the measures of the Government, and vainly imagining that, if it would change its policy in some respects, (each particular interest, of course, advocating the adoption of a totally different policy,) the halcyon days of happiness and prosperity would return; and the Government, on the other hand, with equal and much more inexcusable ignorance, and infinitely less show of reason, denying that the distress is, in any considerable degree, attributable to its measures, or can be alleviated by any alteration in them. It is probable that the truth, as usual, will be found to lie between these two extremes; and that the distress, though greatly occasioned by circumstances over which the Government neither has, nor can have almost any control, is also to a considerable degree occasioned, and very greatly aggravated, by measures over which it not only has complete control, but which it is bound without delay to alter. Considering the exceedingly intricate and complicated nature of many of the subjects with which it has to deal, in directing the commercial policy of this mighty empire, it is surely far from improbable that it may be mistaken in some one part or other of the national policy; and a paternal Government, so far from feeling hurt at their policy being subjected to the freest discussion, should invite and encourage it, when not pursued with mere party views, by every means in its power.

In this Inquiry, it is proposed to point out, and examine very briefly, a few of what appear to us, the most prominent causes of the present distress, chiefly with the view of calling the attention of more powerful minds to the subject. Truth, and the good of our fellow-creatures are the sole objects of our pursuit in this investigation. He is little, indeed, to be envied who can enter on the discussion of such a subject with any other feelings than those of the purest patriotism, and an ardent desire to benefit his fellow-creatures. In engaging in this discussion, we have endeavoured to bury all distinctions of party in oblivion, and to view the whole nation as constituting one family, while our chief, nay, only anxiety, has been to ascertain how the interests of the whole can be best secured and promoted.

Constituted as the world is, distress always must prevail in it