

**LETTER TO THE ELECTORS  
OF STROUD,  
ON THE PRINCIPLES  
OF THE REFORM ACT**

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Letter to the electors of Stroud, on the principles of the Reform act by John Russell

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**JOHN RUSSELL**

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## LETTER.

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GENTLEMEN,

HAD I been apprehensive of the loss of your good opinion, from the assiduous attempts to deprive me of it, I should have found, long before this time, abundant reasons for addressing you.— More than a year ago, the Political Union of Birmingham endeavoured, by printed misrepresentations, to induce you to declare that I had lost your confidence, and that it ought to be transferred to a disciple of their own school of politics. Soon after this, the Anti-Slavery Delegates sent a special mission to induce you to disturb the course which I had thought it my duty to take, as the member of a Government and of a Parliament whose faith were pledged by their own recorded acts.

Besides these formidable bodies, a gentleman of some talents for mischief, has lately undertaken the task of persuading you that his unfitness to remain in the commission of the peace is a proof of his fitness to become your representative.

These repeated efforts however have had, as I am told, scarcely a perceptible effect, and I should not think it worth while to interrupt the duties in which

I am engaged, for the purpose of removing illusions which your own good sense must dispel.

Another, and as I think, more cogent reason, induces me to address you. The public mind is shaken by disputes and urged on by declamation relating to the Reform Act. From that Act your electoral privileges are derived. Upon that Act the present constitution of the House of Commons is based. To that Act, seven years ago, the general and willing consent of the country was given. Before it is repealed, and especially before it is exchanged for a scheme hitherto indefinite and unexplained, it seems to me desirable that some one connected with the introduction of that plan of Reform, and who still adheres to its principles, should place the whole matter before those who will have ultimately to decide upon the important question, whether it is to be set aside as an experiment which has totally failed, and a new scheme of Representation set up in its place; or whether we may not found upon the Reform Act the amendments and improvements which all institutions from time to time require?

I have put the question thus, because, on the one side, the present Ministry and their friends have never pretended that amendments of the details of the Reform Act might not from time to time be required; and, on the other hand, it is obvious that nothing but a total failure of the endeavour then made to substitute representation for nomination,

would either persuade or justify the people of England in commencing a new struggle for the sake of a change of so extensive a nature as those that have been lately proposed to us.

It is not necessary, for my purpose, to place in the front of the argument the declaration made by Lord Grey and Lord Althorp, the organs of the Government in the two Houses of Parliament, that the Reform Bill was intended as a permanent settlement of a great constitutional question. On this head I may say a few words hereafter ; but for the present I address myself to your position, and not to mine, and I wish you to consider, unconnected as you are with all that occurred previous to the enactment of the Reform Bill, whether it is for your interest and that of the country in general,—whether it will tend to the prosperity of trade and industry,—whether it will promote that general sense of security, without which, no progress in wealth can be made,—whether it will promote the stability of those Institutions to which the great majority of us still cling,—to commence a new agitation for the sake of some new kind of Representation.

In discussing this, the first question upon which I shall touch, it will hardly be denied, I presume, that there are some Acts of a far more important nature than others, and that the Bill of Rights and the Acts of Union with Scotland and Ireland ought not to be altered so lightly as a law regulating the sale of beer, or fixing the districts for petty sessions of the peace. Of the former kind, for instance, is the

Act of Succession to the Crown of these realms.— Suppose some one had said, in 1722, “King George is ignorant of our language; he has no experience of a free government; no knowledge of this country; he has sanctioned the Septennial Act; the people are greatly discontented; it will be better to change the dynasty.” It would surely have been sufficient answer, without discussing the personal merits of the Sovereign, to say, “The Act of Settlement is a very recent Act; the succession was a matter of great difficulty, and attended with imminent danger of civil war; we have happily seen it established: let us now, for a time at least, try if we cannot be happy and free under the House of Hanover.”

Or, let us take a more homely illustration. —Go to a gentleman who has lately repaired his house; shew him a plan for altering the whole of it, with a number of finished drawings, and a beautiful view of the south front,—he may very probably say, “Many thanks, my good sir; but a few years ago, at great expence, and with much trouble, I had my house completely repaired; it has been greatly enlarged—new rooms have been added: for two years I could hardly sleep for the noise of the workmen. If I am to begin again, and to make, as you propose, the plan of my house Grecian instead of Gothic, I shall not know peace or comfort for the rest of my life: I must decline your obliging offer.”

Thus it is with many great as well as minor



matters. Thus it is that although many persons think the Roman Catholic Relief Act faulty in some of its provisions, and that the prolix oath it imposes, might well be exchanged for a simple oath of allegiance, and although many others are of opinion that the Act has done great mischief, and not fulfilled the expectations held out by its promoters, yet there is no party which proposes in Parliament either the repeal, or any considerable alteration of that Act. Thus it is also that no one proposes to pull down Buckingham Palace, or to rebuild Regent Street on a new plan, though many an architect is ready with drawings and elevations, to shew how we might improve the comfort, and increase the beauty both of palace and street.

Yet it may be, after all, that the Reform Act is so full of defects, that it is based on principles so false, that it has so entirely failed in securing representation to the people, that we ought to begin anew, and to lose no time in declaring to the world that the experiment has failed. For the purpose of forming an opinion upon this question, it will be advisable to consider what was the ancient scheme which was overturned, and what are the principles which pervade the Reform Act of 1832.

In proposing a reform of the representation of the people it always appeared to me, that there were two things to be proved; the one was, that the Members of the House of Commons did not

individually represent the people; the other, that collectively, they did not speak the sense of the people.

Had the first branch of this argument failed, there was an end of the question. But it did not and could not fail; on the contrary, it was admitted that peers and other proprietors, named without controul, at their own caprice, a great proportion of the Members of the House of Commons. Accordingly, when I once moved for a committee to ascertain the facts respecting the nomination boroughs, Mr. Canning said it was unnecessary, the guilt was admitted; the facts alledged were not denied.

There remained, however, the other portion of the question, Did the House of Commons virtually represent the people? For if the people were in effect represented, why should sober men resort to an extensive change merely to introduce a theoretical improvement from which no practical advantage was to be derived?

It was therefore necessary to shew that in fact, the decisions of the House of Commons were not in conformity with the general sense of the people. In order to do this, I contrasted the votes of the small borough members, with those of the representatives of counties and large cities upon several important questions. The result was, that the known representatives of the people were in direct opposition to the majority of the House of Commons.

Thus cautiously did it appear to me necessary to proceed in laying the foundations for a change so important, and so pregnant with consequences of future felicity or woe.

These considerations were likewise deserving of deliberate attention, when a plan of Reform was at length to be proposed to Parliament by the authority of the Crown. Nomination was to be replaced by representation, and the House of Commons was to be so modelled, as in future to be deserving of the confidence, and a mirror of the sentiments of the people. With this view, there were several leading questions to be considered. They were,

I. The places by which Members were to be returned.

II. The franchise which was to entitle electors to vote.

III. The mode of election.

With respect to the first of these questions, there were several courses open to us :

1. To retain all the boroughs, entitled by law to return members, admitting the inhabitants to vote.
2. To take one member from a certain number of boroughs, leaving one to be returned in the former mode.
3. To abolish only a few of the nomination boroughs.
4. To divide the country into districts of equal population.