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# ROBERT OWEN'S

## REPLY TO THE QUESTION

"WHAT WOULD YOU DO, IF YOU WERE  
PRIME MINISTER OF ENGLAND?"

*Price One Penny.*

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AN intelligent friend, who has long studied, with deep interest, the system which I recommend for general investigation, and who approves of it, to the extent to which it has been explained, lately suggested the great utility that would arise to the public, from supposing myself invested with full power to administer the affairs of this country, and stating the measures which, in that case, I would adopt to obtain and secure the permanent prosperity and happiness of the people.

And as many of my disciples, in this and in other countries, have, at various times, expressed a similar wish; and as the continuance of life, especially at my age, is uncertain, I now feel it a duty incumbent upon me to comply with the request.

But, to perform this task as it ought to be executed, it is requisite that I should take into consideration the existing prejudices, customs, and practices of the lower, middle, and higher orders; the present state of parties, religious, political, and commercial; the new position in which late events have placed the two Houses of Parliament, with respect to each other and to the country; the condition of Ireland, as it bears upon the general interests of England and of the empire; and our present foreign relations.

Under the supposition, then, that I was appointed by the Crown, with the consent of the People, to effect for them the greatest amount of advantages, in the shortest time, and with the fewest evils to individuals, the question is, What course would I adopt, and what are the practical measures which I would recommend ?

My answer to these questions is, that I would change all the existing low, inferior, and vicious circumstances, for others of a very superior character. I would therefore, commence my administration by informing all foreign states that the British Government was about to change its national proceedings, both domestic and foreign ;—that it was going to effect this change in consequence of having detected the source of the errors on which all governments have been hitherto founded and governed, and from which, in fact, all laws and institutions have emanated ; and because it had discovered the principles on which society ought now to be based, and upon which all laws and institutions ought now to be established, for the general benefit of all nations ;—that the whole extent of the change should be fully explained to them, and their aid and cordial co-operation solicited to carry it into effect, without injury to individuals or nations ;—that the old mode of conducting the diplomacy between nations, should, on the part of Great Britain, be abandoned : and, instead thereof, the plain, simple language of truth should be used, and no attempt should be made to deceive any party, or to take advantage of their ignorance or weakness ; but, on the contrary, that Great Britain would exert all her power and energies to promote the improvement and happiness of all nations.

I would also inform them, that, while this change from wrong to right principles and practices was in progress, Great Britain would adopt, and maintain, an attitude of national power, that would render all attacks upon her from without so hopeless of success, that none would be attempted. While, on the other hand, all nations would become conscious that the new principles which she had adopted would prevent, on her part, any aggression or injustice of any kind.



Great Britain would, by these means, acquire the confidence and friendship of all nations and people, and soon terminate the necessity for the continuance of the present extravagant and injurious system of diplomacy, with all its absurd and unmeaning phraseology.

I would next make arrangements to give, after proper preparation for the purpose, political freedom to all our dependencies in the four quarters of the world, and to enable them to govern themselves; but I would, as at present protect them from foreign attack or subjugation. These colonies should, also, as long as it was necessary, receive every aid from the mother country to improve their character and condition, and increase their wealth.

I would also institute measures to induce all nations to adopt a common language, in addition to their own, to facilitate the communication between the most distant parts of the world, and, by degrees, to make all men of one nation, with one language and one interest.

Simultaneously with these proceedings relative to foreign nations and our colonies, I would announce to the population of the British empire the change of the fundamental principles which was about to commence, for the benefit of all persons, of every rank, and of their posterity through endless ages. And, to calm the minds of those who now hold private property, and possess exclusive privileges, it should be declared, and so arranged, that none should be deprived of the one or the other, or disturbed in their present position, until their increased intelligence should induce them to desire the change.

I would then inform the population that the existing laws, customs, and institutions should remain in force, until new arrangements could be made to supersede them, without any violent or sudden change; but that the evils arising from the present order of things should be prevented, by removing, as rapidly as the national means would admit, the causes which produce them: and the causes being the mal-arrangements of society, formed under the most mistaken notions of human nature, and a total ignorance of the mode of adjusting the affairs of life, new

and very superior arrangements should be adopted for educating, employing, and governing the whole population.

All who can observe and reason, now know "*That man is the creature of the circumstances in which he is placed*;" therefore the vicious and inferior circumstances, which the want of better knowledge and more experience in our ancestors has allowed to grow up to their present complication of error, should be made gradually to yield to new and improved arrangements, in which the superior natural qualities of man might be called into full action, and in which he should obtain all the advantages of a wise association of his powers with those of his fellow-men, for their highest mutual advantage.

And this is, really, all that is now required, to change the present most cruel and irrational condition of the human race, into a state of terrestrial paradise. Ignorance has produced the one; while wisdom, which includes knowledge and goodness, will produce the other.

I would then have explained to all parties the following great and everlasting truths, on which, alone, universal charity and affection can be established, and applied in practice to the daily and hourly transactions of every individual: viz.—

"That man is not a being formed by nature to deserve individual reward or punishment; but a being so totally different, that he may be educated from his birth, by the arrangements of others, to become good in all his relations in life; highly useful to himself, and beneficial to his fellows; rational and wise in all his conduct, so as to insure happiness to himself and others. Or, with the same certainty, he may be educated to have his faculties so neglected, or erroneously cultivated, that he shall be made to acquire the worst qualities that can be given to human nature, and to become, to himself and others, through his life, the cause of much misery."

As all who consider themselves in a comparatively better situation than the great mass of the people, are unwilling to risk any great change, and would, therefore,

oppose every thing that indicated the introduction of an entirely new system,—I would calm their fears, by showing them the change of character and condition which I would make first on those who now the most require to have them changed ; that is, upon the ignorant, the vicious, and miserable. And I would convince all of the practicability of this change, by creating new circumstances for these individuals, which should gradually turn their ignorance into intelligence, their viciousness into real goodness, and their misery into happiness.

From this alteration in the minds, manners, and conduct of these *now* poor, unfortunate, because neglected, beings, all should be satisfied of the overwhelming power of the influence of external circumstances. Of the full extent of this power, all parties are yet without knowledge : it is unlimitable, and competent to make man, angel or devil.

By these preliminary proceedings, all would be convinced, by ocular demonstration, that a due cultivation and wise exercise of all our natural powers—physical, intellectual, and moral, are absolutely necessary to give a high degree of happiness to each individual ; and that the over-employed and under-employed, the uncultivated and ill-cultivated, are necessarily imperfect and unhappy beings.

These preliminary proceedings would also prove to the world, that the necessity for poverty, or the fear of it, has ceased, through the discoveries in various sciences ; for these discoveries should be so applied, under our new arrangements, that, with their aid, every portion of the population should be enabled, with light labour, or rather with necessary and pleasant exercise, to produce more of all the necessaries, comforts, and beneficial luxuries, than the same population would desire to use or consume ; and thus real wealth would be continually upon the increase in every part of the British dominions, and, soon, in every other part of the world. •

I would effect this change without adding any new burdens to the people. The funds which are now wasted, in what is called supporting the poor and bringing

criminals to justice, as the poor and criminals would rapidly be diminished, would be ample to defray the expense of the great change proposed; and by the creation of these new arrangements, the annual wealth produced would be very speedily doubled, then trebled, and quadrupled. It is a great want of a knowledge of facts, which prevents parties from discovering how easily wealth may be produced by every population, greatly beyond the most extravagant wants of that population.

I would raise the funds requisite for the objects to be attained, by making the poor national, and collecting an equitable rate from all parishes; which rate would be speedily diminished below the average parish-rate now collected, and then it would be gradually reduced to nothing. As long as there shall be one shilling raised for poor-rate in Great Britain; that is, as long as a system shall be allowed to continue, which permits one British subject to be in poverty or in idleness, or in the most distant fear of poverty, Great Britain will be ignorantly governed. And as long as there shall be one person in the British dominions allowed to grow up in ignorance, vice, and bad habits of any kind, Great Britain will be ignorantly and viciously governed; for both of these evils may now, by good government, be easily avoided.

To prevent these enormous national evils, I would make immediate arrangements to employ every person willing to be, and capable of being, employed in creating the new circumstances, in which the present unemployed and ignorant should find useful work and instruction, at all times, suitable to the age and capacity of the individual: and within these arrangements young, middle-aged, and old should immediately be instructed in the most useful knowledge.

To attain these objects, I would make arrangements to purchase, at a fair price, all such estates, proper for the purpose, as were offered for sale in England, Ireland, and Scotland. On these estates, the new superior circumstances should be created, that should gradually render the continuance of the present inferior and vicious circumstances unnecessary and impossible.

These new superior circumstances would consist in a different disposition and better cultivation of the land ; in a different disposition and internal arrangement of the domestic dwellings and public buildings for instruction and recreation ; in a different disposition and better arrangement of manufactures and trades, and for distributing the various productions among the population upon these estates, and for exchanging them with more distant populations, in other countries.

By these changes it might be expected that, before the expiration of four or five years at the most, two millions per day of additional substantial valuable wealth would be produced in Great Britain and Ireland, and that there would be, what to the ignorant would appear a miraculous change in the character, condition, and happiness of the population of these islands.

There is now no one obstacle to this change being immediately commenced, and to a great progress being made in it annually, but the want of knowledge on the part of those individuals who influence the measures of our government.

And the change may be effected by the most plain, simple, straight-forward, practical measures ; such as farmers, gardeners, manufacturers, tradesmen, teachers of youth, sea-faring persons, and practical statesmen, could readily comprehend, and, by direction, put into practice. And these changes would naturally arise from acting, consistently, upon a few fundamental principles, now admitted by all well educated, reflecting persons, and upon facts well known to all scientific and intelligent practical men.

I would thus, as director of the administration of this country—

First, Obtain for Great Britain the confidence and friendship of all foreign nations and people, by so decidedly deserving both that they could not be withheld.

Second, The same confidence and friendship should be, on the same principles, secured from all our present dependencies.

Third, Arrangements would be thus made to remove the cause of poverty, or the fear of it, in one year, from the British dominions, and to make it evident to the least experienced in the production of wealth, that we possess, in our mineral productions, in our surface soil, in our climate, in our peculiar native physical and mental energies, in the already acquired skill and habits of industry of the people, in the national and private capital, in the domestic and foreign political or national power of the population, in the knowledge of the principles by which these may now be united to effect the most gigantic and mighty purposes; a mine of inexhaustable materials, affording the most ample means that can be desired to create wealth so rapidly, abundantly, and permanently, that, as soon as all the private property shall be purchased, by the nation or government, from individuals, at a full price, which it soon may be, all will perceive the gross folly or madness, in the inhabitants of this, or of any country, hereafter misdirecting their invaluable faculties, in degrading, demoralizing, useless contests for individual possessions or private wealth of any kind; those faculties which might be employed for the attainment of excellence in all knowledge, and for the enjoyment of high happiness in the due cultivation and temperate exercise of each of those faculties. Were it not for the overwhelming influence of early impressions, continually repeated, from external circumstances, the folly and madness of all people and governments, relative to the creation, distribution, and enjoyment of wealth, would appear so glaringly absurd, that children, rationally trained and educated, would, at a very early age, be astounded at the gross inconsistencies of the present nations of the earth,—but more especially of the people and government of this country, who have unlimited means of increasing their powers to produce wealth beyond the possible wants or use of rational creatures.

Fourth, Arrangements would also be thus made to arrest, at once, the flood of ignorance which is daily overspreading the land, flowing from those appointed to instruct the people in kindness, justice, and charity; which knowledge they have been trained to mistake, and, instead



thereof, to be employed most actively in teaching the principles and practices of superstition, oppression, and uncharitableness. These unwise—may we not say, insane?—proceedings, would be superseded by decisive practical measures to prevent one British or Irish child being allowed to remain in ignorance, or permitted to acquire any superstitious or unjust notions, or any uncharitable feeling towards one human being. But, on the contrary, every British and Irish child should have all the faculties of his nature cultivated in their due proportions, and called forth into regular healthy exercise, in such a manner that the individual and society should be the most permanently benefited by them.

Fifth, Arrangements would be thus made to supersede, as speedily as possible, all the present inferior, vicious, and insane circumstances, within which so large a portion of the British and Irish people are now involved. These evil circumstances would be superseded by a new creation of good circumstances, through the irresistible influences of which, these same individuals would have their persons, minds, and morals so changed and improved that they would not, in a comparatively short period, be deemed, by those who had not witnessed the progress of the change, and were uninformed respecting the means applied to effect it, to belong to the same species: the one would be thought to be the irrational, while the other would be deemed the rational beings, of the same genus.

These are the changes, or the new circumstances, which, as Prime Minister, or Adviser of the Crown and People, I would immediately begin to form; and in less than twelve months, the population of this country could be made to think, feel, and act so differently, that their characters should be the reverse of what they now are, or have ever yet been: anxiety would be unknown amongst them, and confidence, arising from the perpetual practice of truth and sincerity, would pervade all, from the oldest to the youngest.

Were these measures adopted with decision, throughout the British dominions, they would also soon change the condition of other nations; for those who have been

trained in erroneous principles only, and have never seen any other practices than those which have emanated from erroneous principles, can form no adequate conception of the rapidity with which the human character, in the mass, may be changed, and improvements of every kind made to advance, as soon as public opinion and the public institutions shall be based upon true fundamental principles, and public measures shall proceed in strict accordance with them.

It is upon this part of the subject that the world is in such complete darkness. It has hitherto known error only in principle and practice; it has found itself involved, by these errors, in continual difficulties, and has met with never-ceasing 'obstacles to its progress towards excellence and happiness; and it has imagined that evils, and their innumerable obstructions, were to keep man in the bondage of ignorance and of the inferior passions, which ignorance alone engenders, for ever. The world could have no belief in the statements which affirmed that the cause of these errors and miseries was known, and could be removed; and that the earth, with less human labour than is now required, and without anxiety, could be made a paradise.

The immediate conversion of men and women from an irreligious to a religious state of mind and feelings, has been often known. But truth, without mystery or mixture of error, being publicly taught from authority, and enforced with the powers of eloquence, which would then be eager to enlist under its banners, could be made by the existing governments to banish all error, and falsehood, and deception, in a period so short, that the regeneration of the public mind would, at first, be considered as the most extraordinary of all the miracles of past times. And it would be so considered, until it should be made manifest by the fact, that the laws of nature, when understood, are capable of effecting more extensive and wonderful changes, than any of the petty local proceedings, even supposing them to have been true, that have been recorded as miracles in any of the religious or other writings of the ancients.

Let the British government now adopt these principles, and act decisively upon them, and all the governments of

Europe and America would be induced, or irresistibly, impelled, for their own safety, interest, and happiness to follow her example; and thus would the more civilized portion of the earth be relieved from the oppressions and bondage of ignorance, and of all the inferior and vile passions which it cultivates in man, and human society would become the abode of high intelligence, under the perpetual influence of the kindest and finest sympathies of our nature; and thus would knowledge, charity, and love fill the minds and hearts of men, and pervade all the transactions of the human race. What a glorious position is now held by the present administration of the British government, if it had knowledge and firmness to make the best use of it!

The most intelligent and best disposed of the Tories, Whigs, and Radicals, and the most enlightened of all parties in church and state, are conscious that a revolution, such as history has not recorded, is now taking place in the human mind; and they must desire that it should proceed and be completed without violence, and, if possible without evil of any kind.

Let the present administration, then, communicate frankly and freely with these individuals; explain to them the necessity for union among them to direct this great change in the destiny of mankind, and the incalculable benefits which one and all may be made immediately to derive from it.

Let them, at the same time, invite the people to turn their attention from their present petty, useless political and religious squabbles about folly and inanity, for they produce only a total absence of justice, charity, and kindness,—and encourage them to give their whole powers to understand the new order of things which this revolution in public opinion will effect; and then truly may it be said, that the great change from evil to good will come “like a thief in the night,” and be produced by a Power, which no man knows “whence it cometh, or whither it goeth.”

Thus, by the most simple and natural means, might the present administration speedily remove ignorance and

poverty, or the fear of it, and all uncharitableness and unkindness, from the British dominions, and speedily from all other nations, for ever; and thus might they effect, at once, that great reform, to which, if they had had foresight, they might have been sure the reform of the Commons' House of Parliament would ultimately lead. The deed is done, and it cannot be undone! The decree has gone forth that "the mind (of man) shall be born again, the world shall be regenerated, a new heaven and a new earth shall arise, and sin and misery shall be known no more!"

ROBERT OWEN.



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C. DUTTON, JUN., PRINTER, STOCKPORT.