

*This was the first note sounded in the
Grand Harmony since known
as "L'Entente Cordiale"*

SPEECH *G. H. Jones*

RP 1122 p

DELIVERED BEFORE

The British Chamber of Commerce

✦ PARIS ✦

NOVEMBER 10TH 1899

BY

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PARIS

IMPRIMERIE P. JOUET

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MR CHAIRMAN & GENTLEMEN,

T. Barclay

Our president requested me to open a discussion at this meeting and left me free to choose a subject. Upon looking round for a question that might be interesting to you it occurred to me that, as "Charity begins at home" my researches should also ; and, therefore, I fell on a very near theme to us all, which is "Our position with regard to the French people".

Now this question admits of at least a threefold division viz.

"Our commercial position".

"Our National position" and

"Our social position".

Of these three divisions the first in order "Our Commercial position" should, at a Chamber of Commerce meeting, take precedence not only as to time but as to importance ; and therefore I commence with it.

From preceding meetings in this room we have learnt, that, although England takes more and more French goods, yet, at the very best, the importations from England into France have not increased of late years. Now this state of things is far from satisfactory and very much to be deplored.

How can we account for it ? Is it because English goods have depreciated in quality and consequently that the French people do not appreciate them so highly ? Is it that the stirring up of National jealousies has gone against our sales, or, *What is the reason ?* Neither as an Englishman nor as a business man can I think that English goods have depreciated in quality, or that

the French people value them less in themselves or from any National ill feeling that many have tried to create or increase. I still believe that English goods are *good* goods, and are as much in favour with the French people as ever.

How then is it that our importations have not increased ?

To my mind there can be but one answer to this question, and I furnish it in : “ Increased customs duties ”

To business men I need not explain the influence of these duties, and the great obstacle they are to our import trade. None of us have much to learn under this head ; but what we have to find out is how are we to overcome this obstacle ; for the accomplishing of this Herculean task is the justification of our presence in France.

Mr Chairman, if we wanted to fell a tree we should endeavour to get at its roots, and to take a tower, I fancy, we should try to sap its foundations and destroy its buttresses ; and so with this tree, or tower of customs duties. There are many roots to this evil tree, and many buttresses to this dark dungeon-like tower ; but I think you will agree with me when I say that the most important of all is *Protection*.

“ Protection ” *so called, what is it ?*

Why a thousand headed monster ! The dark ages of commercial history, that would lead us to doubt of our own capacity and to throw ourselves at the feet of some fetish whose priests would live on our blood that, slowly oozing out, would leave us corpses.

It is the taxing of doors and windows to keep out the light and air of heaven so that we all may die of anemia.

It is the taxing of the Press in order that our minds may be as weak and impoverished as our blood.

It is the foolish mother who so binds up her child that his limbs cannot grow freely and thus become irregular and enfeebled.

It is *Black Darkness* in which evil doers revel, and it is *Crass Ignorance* that allows a few to profit at the expense of the many.

Yes, *Crass Ignorance* for this is Protection's daily sustenance. Is it not monstrous that in this age of wire and wireless telegraphy, grand boats, express trains and all imaginable improvements in locomotion, is it not monstrous, I ask, that benighted man should raise this barrier of protection to the free circulation of the world's blood (food and industries) from member to member? — For, Mr Chairman, here is the question. It is the grand battle of liberty that we have to wage: "liberty to buy where I wish to buy, and liberty to sell to those who wish to buy from me."

Freedom of exchange! Freedom of thought! Freedom of speech! all equally important as freedom to breathe, and see, and hear.

Here then in Protection we behold our enemy plainly and how shall we attack him? If, as I said before, he is darkness and ignorance then let light and information out upon him in all their force.

When shall the Renaissance of commerce have birth, and increasing swiftly drive before it the mists of unenlightened business minds till men shall see, clearly, their glorious privilege of being able to profit of the produce of all climes, and the varied excellencies of different peoples; instead of being obliged, like cattle, to eat only of the produce of the one field in which they are hedged.

And now shall we not ask ourselves what we can do to hasten the bursting forth of this Commercial Renaissance?

And here let me remind you of the meaning of the word Renaissance. Clearly it means a *new birth*, and rightly do I employ the word in this paper; for is it not true that Protection is of recent origin, and, like weeds, has grown apace and covered the ground formerly occupied by a freer interchange of produce between nations? We read of some export duties on English wool in the time of Henry VIII; but do we read of import duties in early history or till something like a century ago?

But, Mr Chairman, we are now asking ourselves what we can do to break down this new fence put up around this fair land of France, and the thought must crop up in our minds immediately that to preach a gospel in other lands we must be convinced of its truth, and see that, as a nation, we hold fast to it and avoid the reproof "Physician heal thyself" that could otherwise be administered to us. I will at this time take it for granted that we, as English business men, have been delivered from the thraldom of protection and are all aglow with the desire of bringing others under the happy influence of the true business faith. We feel that to have an exact view of anything is in itself a satisfaction, and to see business in a correct way will ease our minds, and keep us from much irritation that would impair the force necessary for the due discharge of our daily work. For instance, if we believe that man's privilege is to enjoy the wine of France, the coffee of Brazil, the Tea of India and China and every other product of other lands than his own, shall we Englishmen be dismayed when all these imports added together tell up far above the figures of the goods we send away? Or shall we be cast down when we read of the hundreds of millions of eggs or thousands of tons of sugar that France sends over to England? No, but we shall rejoice that our people have such a goodly supply of nature's abundance, and we shall do our best to obtain for the French people, the privilege of obtaining on the best terms what England has an excellence in producing.

My chief concern, then, is the obtaining for the French people of the above mentioned privilege. How can it be accomplished?

My reply is : *By means of the Press of France.*

The press, to day, is the great schoolmaster; and seeing the immensity of its powers how careful and scrupulous should be the wielders of this mighty force!

Yes, the destinies of a country to day lie in the pens of the writers of the daily papers.

School boys do not occupy themselves with important thoughts, neither do I wish them to. All that is necessary for them is to prepare their faculties, and cut their pens, and exercise their bodies that their minds may have a good chance of strengthening, and thus, be more capable of directing those faculties and pens when manhood comes along and, with it, their time to think, and write. and act.

It is then that the daily paper catches them up and carries them on where it wills that they should go.

Books now adays are for the few who have leisure ; but the daily press bears us all on in its irresistible march ; and it is mainly by its means that an impressions can be made on a nation.

Then to further our object, we must appeal to the Press of France. and especially to those members of it who have a large following.

Can we attempt this with any chance of success ?

It seems to me quite possible, if somewhat difficult, to approach such papers as the " " that send out their daily articles to every little hamlet of France, *creating*, rather than expressing, the opinion of the people ; and if we could enlist the writers on these papers in the army of commercial freedom we should soon see the dawn of the longed for Renaissance.

France possesses papers of the highest standing, in which are expounded the same sound commercial principles that we are accustomed to read in the English press ; but, unfortunately, these superior journals do not penetrate into the thousands of small towns where the protective policy has its chief supporters.

Many of you must have had proofs of this... I myself have been unable, many times, to obtain a copy of "*Le Courrier*" in a town of 15,000 inhabitants. We must, then, appeal to the half penny paper if we are to succeed.

If we go so far as to appeal to these members of the cheap press we must first of all, endeavour to dissociate the question

William
Avery

of Free Trade from England as a political entity We must put before the French people, and keep it there, the fact that England is by far France's best customer; that if we sell English goods here, we buy a vastly larger quantity from them for our own market, and, that in these transactions there is no question of nationality, but the carrying out of the first principle I noted in this paper, i.e. Freedom to buy where I choose and the same Freedom to sell where I can. If Frenchmen with their impulsive natures could but grasp the great truth that "**Free Trade is good for the country that puts it into practice**" we should soon see a change, not only here, but in many countries where, it appears to me, the French press has more influence than our own.

Our friends on this side the channel speak much of liberty and freedom, and is liberty and freedom as applied to trade to be despised?

Surely liberty, not licence, is good in all forms. True liberty, as you know, ends where licence begins. We discard licence as being the abuse of liberty and only cherish liberty's proper use. I think we Englishmen have a noble crusade before us in trying to convert our friends around us to our way of thinking in this respect. Cannot we get them to see that our aim is not a selfish one; but that as we, as a nation, have so immensely profited by our creed so we would that they should also?

I cannot account for great ascendancy in the world's commerce by any natural superiority in our race. I believe that the Frenchman has equal, if different, qualities with ourselves. In many ways France is better placed than England. Look at her sunshine in comparison with ours! Contrast her wine with our beer as a creative force! Examine her geographical position and you will find it is as good as well could be imagined. Were her many advantages coupled with commercial freedom she would immediately speed ahead, and approach the front in this way, as she does at present in art and literature.

No poor feeling of jealousy at the advance of a business

X opponent would we English harbour; but would look forward to a higher level in the commercial life all round as the result of a healthy rivalry between us. X

You will have remarked that I have not troubled you with statistics this evening. Figures, though very necessary, are somewhat dry. I would rather, as the prophet of old depicts the scene, call on the spirit of freedom to breathe over the dry bones of benighted business ways, bring them together, and infuse a new and purer life into them. Then would our statistics have a brighter appearance, and becoming more interesting would entice us to linger longer with them.

Here I leave "Our commercial position" simply adding an earnest hope that something in the way I have indicated may be attempted soon.

Now, Mr Chairman, I come to our "National position with regard to the French people".

The scotch poet, Robert Burns, in one of his poems prays that "God may give us the gift to see ourselves as others see us". Often have I wished that the films of envy and jealousy might fall from Frenchmen's eyes and, that they looking through a limpid honest press, could be enabled to have a clearer, truer view of our nation.

What are they telling us continually, and apparently with conviction?

That we are "perfidious Albion"

That we are essentially a selfish race.

That we are always on the look out to grasp other people's property.

That we bully the weak and cow before the strong.

To write down the many disagreeable epithets they cast at us would be a long and unpleasant task.

Mr Chairman, cannot we say here, most truthfully, that ignorance occupies a very prominent place at this judgment bar just as it does when Protection is on the stage? After their great trial in the war of 1870 they were very angry with us because

we did not come to their aid and continue the comradeship in arms begun in the Crimea. We can understand their soreness and their inability, at the time, to see how impossible it was for us to take up their quarrel and fight against those who were as much our friends as they themselves.

Now they discuss that question much more coolly, and begin to see the course we then followed was the only one possible for us; and I fancy the taunt of “perfidè Albion” is losing strength and making way for the reproach of national selfishness which we hear so much of.

And in a sense do we, not merit this characteristic, and do we not rejoice in being worthy to be so judged?

Most certainly we do, and where is the government that would dare to be generous with the interests and possessions of a country? In my personal ways, and with my own property, lavishness and an open hand will be a quality; but put me in a position of trust where I shall have to act for others, and with other people’s goods, then the whole question is altered and what in the first case was a quality becomes in the second criminal. Thus government or a nation does not act for itself alone but has in its care the interests and well being of future governments and succeeding generations.

Looking at this reproach of selfishness as I do, it appears nothing but a compliment, and I gladly accept it. Having had very frequently to reason these matters with French friends it has generally been my agreeable lot to meet with their approval, and to hear them say that, after all, they ought to imitate us in this national characteristic.

When speaking of « our national position » I am obliged to mention the chief events that have had most influence on it; but I hope and believe no word will escape me that could give offence to the most sensitive. My object is to round off the corners of susceptibility and make it easier for our neighbours to get an all round view of our national character.

With this safeguard may I not say a word or two of Egypt?

Here is one of the occasions in which we have been accused very strongly of that grasping instinct before mentioned.

Yes, certainly, Egypt has been a very sore point and for a long time. The French had great interests there and the two countries, jointly, were responsible for its well being, and a time came when they felt they were not free to accompany us in the action we considered necessary, and they felt we had profited by their weakness. I readily admit that had I been a Frenchman I should have thought as they did. But, really, what could have been done other than what we did?

And here let us admit that we are a grasping race, ready to grasp all we possibly can from the clutches of darkness. We grasped the fellaheen from the "corvées", and we grasped the finances of Egypt from the hands of dilapidators, and we are grasping more and more of the land from the broiling sand of the desert and endeavouring to turn a wilderness into a garden.

But is this a selfish grasping when the very first thing we do is to open wide the gates and invite most cordially all other civilized nations to enter the land and to profit with us of any advantages to be found therein?

Our grasping is not that of the highway brigand but rather that of the taking hold of the drowning man and snatching him back from the jaws of death.

Where is a nobler instance of the grasping from the clutches of darkness to be found than in our Soudan expedition?

I am quite sure that if Frenchmen could read in their press a faithful account and explanation of that advance of England into the haunts of slavery and degraded man, we should have in them most hearty admirers.

And then would they not comprehend how that grand scheme of a Cape to Cairo railway has taken such a hold on our minds, and realize that their interests and those of White and Black alike are bound up with it? I am persuaded that the French people, who are naturally generous in their sympathies, would, had they understood our views have hesitated before

appearing to wish to thwart us on that line by the planting of a post in a marshy swamp.

I will now follow this railway line of the future and reach the Transvaal a field where we are having a very rough time indeed, in the war of words, similar to that our soldiers are undergoing on the real battlefield.

It would not be possible, I imagine, to have a clearer case in which to show the immense space that ignorance occupies in the French press than in the judgments that French writers have passed upon us in this Transvaal crisis.

Why, in this matter we have had the whole range, a regular broadside, of the hard and disagreeable charges thrown at us.

Have we not been perfidious in our diplomacy; essentially selfish and grasping in our policy, and have we not tried to bully the puny Transvaal state?

Now how stands this matter? Certainly our primary consideration is to maintain our Imperial predominance in that great country generally known as South Africa; but, surely, to maintain a possession is not taking away that of another. Beyond this national object I see little that England is doing for herself; but very much that she will accomplish for others.

Is she not determined to take the government from a very small oligarchy and to place it in the hands of the many inhabitants of the land, and so give liberty to them all, to the Boers as well as to those others who have had to toil and pay? Where is the greed in this?

And the gold mines? they ask. Yes, we are accused of wanting to take these mines from the Boers; but if I rightly understand the matter these mines no longer belong to the Boers, but to the shareholders, and in this case I am content to leave England's defence in the hands of the real owners of these mines. In this grave matter, rendered graver by the unanimous moral support of Europe to our opponents, we have put our hands to the plough, and may have to furrow deeply; but we may be very sure that the greater the upheaval of the soil so much

more abundant will be the harvest. The unanimous moral support I noted above is doubtless a fact, although it is not merited. To those not well acquainted with the facts we are fighting against a race whose only aim is to maintain its freedom. If they could be told that the freedom the Boers claim is the liberty to trample upon that of others, and to treat the black people as beasts of burden, and to enrich themselves by plundering the toiling masses; then I think, our National position would be more agreeable over here. Already there are French writers on the way to a clearer view of the case, and I fancy we shall soon see a great change in the judgments of France on our action in South Africa.

Mr Chairman, what we want above all things in these Commercial and National questions is *more light*. Shall we not strive to obtain and propogate ^a more and of this great gift, and endeavour to dissipate the darkness that I grieve to say many wish to maintain and increase?

I now arrive at the third, and last, subdivision of my subject viz "**Our social position**" and on this my words will be few.

It seems to me that in our social position we should do what we can, each one of us, to impart to those Frenchmen we meet our Commercial and National views that we have been considering.

Here we are amongst a foreign people, every one of us a small part of a great whole, and we should always bear in mind that we are thus a portion of our country. If so, then, shall we not be careful of the impression we make on those around us remembering that they will judge of England by those portions that pass before their eyes?

True, we do not all live in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, but we are all ambassadors, and we can all do something, however small, to improve England's position in the eyes of the French.

Then let us be up and doing.

England, the land where real freedom first took root when, a thousand years ago, the unanimous voice of twelve men was

necessary to convict a fellow man; where a race ^{first} firts worked out self government and put a curb on kings; where liberty of commerce we revived and from whence serfdom took its departure centuries ago; yes truly, England should have good and true Ambassadors in all her sons who leave her shores.

We need not be vain glorious in our speech and ways; but we must have true views of our Nation's history and policy and present them fearlessly, as occasions present themselves, and Frenchmen, readily acknowledging our high ideal, will esteem us all the more.

Mr Chairman,

I have endeavoured in these few lines to bring out "Our position with regard to the French people" in a Commercial, National, and Social sense.

When I commenced this paper I knew not where I should wander.

I am sure you cannot think I have strayed among the dreary fields of statistics too long; and I hope you well feel able to say that I have kept to the high road of our English position, and have fairly well avoided the thorns of National differences that beset my path.

