



CONGRESS.

PHILADELPHIA.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 20.

In committee of the whole, on the Fishery Bill.

[CONTINUED.]

MR. WILLIAMSON.—It has been urged with great propriety, in favor of the bill now submitted to our consideration, that the operation of our laws should in all cases tend to encourage useful industry; that while we are giving back the duties on all other foreign goods which are exported, it would be unjust and cruel to refuse a full drawback of the duties on salt which may be exported, especially when the circumstances of its exportation, are attended with an increase of riches and strength to the nation. Impressed as I am with the force of these arguments, and desirous as I am to protect and encourage the native seamen of America by all prudent, practicable, and constitutional means, I shall nevertheless find it my duty to vote for striking out the first section of the bill, because it proposes to give a bounty for the encouragement of the vessels employed in the fisheries.

We have been told that the name is improper; that it is simply a drawback of the duty upon salt, and gentlemen have produced a very ingenious calculation, by which they attempt to prove, that in some years it may happen, that the whole duty on the salt will not be repaid; but they admit that in some years the drawback or bounty will exceed the duty. It is certainly their opinion, and in this we are perfectly agreed, that the money to be paid will be more than that received, else there had been no use for so large an appropriation. We shall not trouble the committee with calculations on this subject. It is conceded that the encouragement to be given probably, will exceed the full drawback of the duty on salt. In other words a douceur or a proper bounty is to be given—let us call it one thousand dollars per annum. Is it within the powers of this Congress to grant bounties? I think not, and on this single position, I would rest the argument.

In the constitution of this government there are two or three remarkable provisions which seem to be in point. "It is provided that direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several states according to their respective numbers." It is also provided that "all duties, imposts, and excises shall be uniform throughout the United States;" and it is provided that no preference shall be given by any regulation of commerce or revenue to the ports of one state over those of another. The clear and obvious intention of the articles mentioned was, that Congress might not have the power of imposing unequal burdens, that it might not be in their power to gratify one part of the Union by oppressing another. It appeared possible and not very improbable, that the time might come, when by greater cohesion, by more unanimity, by more address, the representatives of one part of the union might attempt to impose unequal taxes or to relieve their constituents at the expense of other people. To prevent the possibility of such a combination, the articles that I have mentioned were inserted in the constitution. Suppose a poll tax should be attempted, suppose it should be enacted that every poll in the eastern states, shall pay a tax of half a dollar, and every poll in the southern states should pay a tax of one dollar. Do you think we should pay the tax? No, certainly. We should plead the constitution, and tell you that the law was impotent and void.

But we have been told that Congress may give bounties for useful purposes:—that is to say, they may give bounties for all imaginable purposes, because the same majority that votes the bounty will not fail to call the purpose a good one. Establish the doctrine of bounties and let us see what may follow. Uniform taxes are laid to raise money—and that money is distributed—not uniformly; the whole of it may be given to the people in one end of the Union. Could we say in such a case that the tax had been uniform—I think not.—There is certainly a majority in this house who think that the nation would be stronger and more independent, if all our labor was performed by free men. This object might be promoted by a bounty. Let a poll tax be laid according to the constitution of one dollar per poll; in this case sixty cents must be paid for each slave, and the number of slaves being 680,186, their tax would amount to 334,911 dollars. To encourage the labor of citizens, let Congress then give an annual bounty of one dollar to every free man who is a mechanic, or who labors in the field. We might be told that the bounty was

small, and the object was good, but the measure would be most oppressive, for it would be a clear tax of rather more than three hundred thousand dollars on the southern states.

Perhaps the case I have put is too strong. Congress can never do a thing that is so palpably unjust, but this sir, is the very mark at which the theory of bounties seems to point. The certain operation of that measure is the oppression of the southern states, by superior numbers in the northern interest. This was to be feared at the formation of this government, and you find many articles in the constitution, besides those I have quoted, which were certainly intended to guard us against the dangerous bias of interest and the power of numbers.—Wherefore was it provided that no duty should be laid on exports? Was it not to defend the great staples of the southern states, tobacco, rice, and indigo from the operation of unequal regulations of commerce or unequal indirect taxes: as another article had defended us from unequal direct taxes.

I do not hazard much in saying that the present constitution had never been adopted without those preliminary guards in it. Establish the general doctrine of bounties, and all the provisions I have mentioned become useless. They vanish into air, and like the baseless fabric of a vision, leave not a trace behind. The common defence and general welfare, in the hands of a good politician, may supersede every part of our constitution, and leave us in the hands of time and chance. Manufactures in general, are useful to the nation, they promote the public good and general welfare; how many of them are springing up in the northern states? Let them be properly supported by bounties, and you will find no occasion for unequal taxes. The tax may be equal in the beginning, it will be sufficiently unequal in the end.

We are told that a nursery of seamen may be of great use to the nation, and the bounty proposed is a very small one. These sir, are the reasons why I have marked this as a dangerous bill: the most dangerous innovations are made under these circumstances. To begin with a great bounty would be imprudent, and to give a small bounty for a doubtful purpose, might deserve a worse epithet. Half a million of dollars per annum, would have been too much for a beginning, and perhaps a bounty on the use of sleighs, though they are convenient for travelling in winter; or a bounty on stone fences, though they are durable, would not at this time be prudent. The object of the bounty, and the amount of it, are equally to be disregarded in the present case: we are simply to consider whether bounties may safely be given under the present constitution; for myself I would rather begin with a bounty of one million per ann. than one thousand; I wish that my constituents may know, whether they are to put any confidence in that paper, called the constitution.

You will suffer me to say, that the southern States have much to fear from the progress of this government, unless your strength is governed by prudence; the operation of the funding system, has translated at least two millions of dollars, from the southern States, that is to say from Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia, to the Northern States. The interest of that sum, when it shall be six per cent. will be 120,000 dollars; but the quota of those States, is at least one third of the whole; whence it follows, that they must pay forty thousand dollars every year, in the form of interest to the northern States. This, it seems, is not sufficient, and other measures are to be adopted for draining the southern States. Bounties to promote the general welfare, are already brought forward; we shall not hear of a bounty for raising rice, or preparing naval stores. If that was the question, the general welfare would not have such prominent features. Unless the southern States are protected by the constitution, their valuable staples, and their visionary wealth, must occasion their destruction. Three short years has this government existed; it is not three years, but we have already given serious alarms to many of our fellow-citizens; establish the doctrine of bounties; set aside that part of the constitution, which requires equal taxes, and demand similar distributions; destroy this barrier, and it is not a few fishermen that will enter, claiming ten or twelve thousand dollars, but all manner of persons—people of every trade and occupation may enter at the breach until they have eaten up the bread of our children.

Perhaps I have viewed this project in too serious a light, but if I am particularly solicitous, on the subject of finance, that we do not even seem to depart from the spirit of the constitution, it is because I wish that the union may be perpetual. The several States are now pretty well relieved from their debts, and our fellow-citizens in the southern States, have very little interest in the national funds; press them a little with unequal taxes, and the remedy is plain.

While I would shun bounties, as leading to dangerous measures, I am not inattentive to every argument that has been advanced by the ho-

norable member who first rose in defence of the bill. That gentleman tells us, that more than a bushel of salt is used in curing a quintal of fish. If this fact be established, the former act should be amended by giving a greater drawback. He says, the drawback as it is now paid to the merchant, does not operate so as to encourage the seamen who have most need of such assistance. This is very probable, and the parties may be relieved by dividing the drawback in the very manner that is proposed by the bill. If it is true that the proposed bounties, will not exceed the average of the drawback that should be paid on salt, why do they contend about names, unless they are solicitous about the precedent. If our object is to encourage industry, and to increase our commerce, by sending fish to a foreign market, we must adhere to the drawback; for according to the terms of the bill, the bounty is to be paid, though every fish that is caught, should be consumed in the country; in which case we should be paying a visionary drawback, when nothing was exported; according to the terms of the bill, there is no proportion between the labour and the reward, so far as the bank fishery is concerned; the bounty in all cases being the same.

Having exercised your patience in objecting to this new system of bounties, and having hinted on some objections to the general operation of the bill, so far as industry and enterprise, may be desired; I shall in a few words, submit the out line of a plan that seems to comprehend all the useful parts of the bill, without any speculation upon bounties.

If the drawback on dried fish exported, is not equal to the duty on the salt used in curing such fish, let the drawback be increased to eleven cents or twelve cents as the case may be. Let us suppose that the drawback for the next year, will be equal to the drawback on the last year; and let that sum of money, being the expected drawback, be divided between the seamen and owners according to the terms of the bill; the accounts must be made up annually. If the drawback exceeds the allowance that had been made, the difference will be considered as advanced to the fishery, and the allowance for the next year, must be somewhat reduced, according to the actual amount of the drawback. If the fishermen are more fortunate or more active, and the exports are increased, the allowance for the next year must be raised. The rule being fixed by law, all that remains being pure calculation, may be done from year to year by the executive. Every important object of this bill that has been presented to our view, may be obtained by safe and constitutional steps. Why should a man take a dangerous and a doubtful path, when a safe one presents itself? If nothing more is desired than to regulate and protect the fishery, the bill may be altered and accommodated to that purpose, if the theory of bounties is to be established, by which the southern States must suffer while others gain; the bill informs us what we are to expect.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23.

Mr. Macon's motion, as amended, reads thus: "Resolved, That the Secretary of the Treasury cause to be laid before the House a statement of the balances, if any, remaining unpaid, which may have been due by individuals to the United States, previous to the 4th day of March, 1789; and whether any and what steps have been taken to recover the same; and also a statement of the sundry sums of public monies, which may have been entrusted to individuals, previous to the said 4th of March, and have not been accounted for."

The yeas and nays having been called on the motion for committing the same, were as follow:

A Y E S.

Messrs. Ames, Baldwin, Barnwell, Benson, Boudinot, S. Bourne, B. Bourne, Clark, Dayton, Findley, Huger, Jacobs, Kittera, Learned, Livermore, Muhlenberg, Murray, Sedgwick, W. Smith, Sterrett, Fitzsimons, Goodhue, Gregg, Hartley, Heister, Hillhouse, Sturges, Sylvester, Wadsworth, Wayne, Wyllis—31.

N A Y S.

Messrs. Ashe, Brown, Gerry, Gilman, Grove, Key, Kitchell, Lee, Macon, Madison, Moore, Niles, Page, Parker, Schoonmaker, Seney, J. Smith, I. Smith, Steele, Sumpter, Thatcher, Treadwell, Tucker, Venable, Vining, White, Williamson—27.

Against the resolution as originally proposed by Mr. Macon, it was objected, that it was informal—that the law instituting the treasury department had made every competent provision in the case—that the duty of the Comptroller was particularly designated—and that if he has been deficient, the proper mode would be to call him to an account, and if found remiss, he should be impeached. The resolution contained an imputation on that officer, and yet no gentleman had come forward with any direct charges against him. It was further said that information had been received from the Comptroller on this sub-