

OPEN LETTER

to Henry Addington (1757–1844), Viscount Sidmouth, Home Secretary (1812–1822)

1819

I am neither your friend nor your admirer, and, therefore, shall not mislead you by flattering your self-love or abusing your credulity. I shall not speak things grateful to ministerial ears; but you may still profit by them, if you please; though, where a man has muddled together conscience, interest, and prejudice, and has coated his understanding with the cement, there is little hope he will be diverted by admonition from the evil of his ways.

My Lord, it is both humiliating and unfortunate that a mind like your Lordship's should have any influence on the fate of England, but this is one fatal consequence of the borough-mongering system. A free representation of the British people would have left you in your proper sphere, to tread in your father's footsteps and, perchance, fill with credit the office of a country church-warden. Alas, instead of this, you are directing our internal policy during a season of danger and difficulty unparalleled in our annals.

Lest your hirelings disguise the matter as they will or can—a *Civil War is begun*. Citizens have fought against citizens. Blood has flowed, not in a private quarrel or for local objects, but in a cause which is arming thousands of desperate men against the established government. It is in vain to call the disturbances at Manchester an accident, to lay the blame on the intemperance of the magistrates, and to consider the Ministry as altogether un-implicated. It is probable that the magistrates were weak or passionate, and acted with culpable indiscretion. Nobody believes that you, my Lord, or your colleagues, gave orders for the yeomanry to surround and attack the multitude.

But, are not these disturbances and this bloodshed the inevitable consequences of the system which you and they have avowed and acted upon? What course of conduct have you pursued since a sense of suffering first directed the minds of the laboring classes towards considering the causes of it? Has it been one of mildness, sympathy, and conciliation? No. *Firmness, Vigor, Energy*—these have been your watchwords; these your battle-cry against the dis-affected. You procured the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act that you might unrestrainedly imprison and persecute them. You sent forth your spies to rouse their despair into rebellion, and then punish them with all the rigor of the law. You continue to ascribe their meetings and sentiments, not to the restlessness of want and actual starvation, but to Jacobinical machinations. You stimulate the local authorities to acts of vigor and severity against them. You put forth the thousand arms of power in hostility against their wretchedness. You insult their wants and inflame their resentments. You glory in all this; and when the machine begins to work, you would disown your own agency. Could you be ignorant, my Lord, that all magistrates are not discreet, un-impassioned, and un-prejudiced? Yet you rouse them into action on occasions which set all their passions in a blaze, and then would seem to be altogether innocent of the conflagration. Your hiring journalists may pretend to shudder at the responsibility the magistrates of Manchester have incurred; yet you dare not to leave them un-supported. You have tolerated—nay, defended—the crimes and follies of your agents. This is consistent; for your own conduct is fashioned by the grossest injustice.

How stands the great account betwixt your Lordship and the thousands of wretched men who may, ere long, be sabred into the silent submission of the grave? You pretend to believe that these starving manufacturers are excited to dis-affection and violence by a few political adventurers. You pretend to believe that it is by the inflammatory arts of these desperate individuals they are induced to charge upon the government evils resulting from circumstances which the government could neither foresee nor control; that, by yielding to such suggestions, they become criminally the accomplices of the suggestors, and merit to be subdued and put down with the utmost severity the law can inflict upon them.

My Lord, in opposition to these opinions, which I believe I have very fairly stated as those of your Lordship and colleagues in office, I venture to affirm that the general symptoms of disaffection, now so rapidly spreading among the laboring classes, are not the work of a few individuals, but grounded on just causes of complaint against the system of government of which your Lordship is a principal agent—that they are not wrong in looking to reform as a remedy for these evils, and that they do not deserve the treatment they have met, and are likely to meet with at the hands of your Lordship.

My Lord, whatever general disposition you may have to close your eyes against conviction, it is scarcely possible you can be ignorant that the laboring classes can be roused against their superiors by such causes only as make a loud and direct appeal to their feelings. Their habits dispose them to a ready acquiescence in whatever they find established, and render them averse from the examination of abstract rights and political theories. “The rights of man” never produced a single tumult but when preached to a starving multitude. Did the Parisian *Poissardes* and *Sans-Culottes* think of arming to maintain their liberty till they were in want of bread?

Your Lordship has heard of Constantinople. There are no reformers there; yet there are mobs who, on every occasion of scarcity, make no scruple of realizing the Lord Mayor’s wildest apprehensions by setting fire to the city, till the Grand Vizier’s head is thrown to them, like a sop to Cerberus, from the windows of the Seraglio. Your Lordship must needs admire the energy, and contempt of popular feelings, which distinguish the Turkish government; yet I doubt, if you were appointed to the control of its Home Department whether the “ignorant impatience” of the multitude would not consign you to the discipline of the bow-string before any part of your spy-and-halter system could be fairly put into action.

As for the manufacturers of Manchester and other commercial towns, you know they cry out for reform because they cannot find work. Have they been harangued into the belief that they and their families are starving? You ministers have indeed an awful idea of an orator in the open air. The credulity of superstition never invested a wizard with half the preternatural powers you ascribe to him. It is something to dim the sun at noon-day, but much more to persuade thousands of rational beings that they are penniless and starving when they are actually in the enjoyment of ease and plenty.

No, my Lord; your conscience tells you that these reform meetings, these outcries for universal suffrage, are produced not, as you would persuade the nation, by the acts of political incendiaries, but by the irritation of want, insult, and injustice. The wretches hunger; their wives and children waste with disease and penury. If they would die in peace, your Lordship’s charity would furnish them with religious tracts at the public expense, to enable them to make a good end of it; but if they grow clamorous in their despair, you prescribe dungeons, halts, and musket-balls. You deride the idea of their deriving any relief from a reform in the representation, and put into the Prince Regent’s mouth a declaration “that, under the pretence of reform, they have really no other object but the subversion of our happy constitution.”

It is possible, and perhaps not altogether un-natural, that they should entertain less exalted notions of “our happy constitution” than your Lordship and your colleagues in office. Men are apt to judge of blessings by effects. “Our happy constitution” produces your Lordship about £10,000 a year, to say nothing of places to your relatives and connections; it will not save these manufacturers from starving. Are you sure, my Lord, that if you were to exchange Richmond Park for one of their foul cellars or miserable garrets, you would keep your admiration of “our happy constitution” at the same elevated pitch?

You pretend to ridicule the notion that any part of their distresses has been caused by a want of reform, or would be removed by obtaining it. Certainly, if they expect that a free representative system would on the instant put bread into their mouths or create the employment which would furnish it, their ignorance is quite as great, though not quite so willful, as that of the corruptionists, who maintain they would derive no benefit whatever from the measure. They are not ignorant that their present sufferings have been caused by the war; and that the war was undertaken to keep down reform.

Reform, therefore, would give them security against a similar misfortune. Reform would produce economy and diminish our expenditure; it would consequently diminish taxation, and thus confer on the manufacturer the double advantage of increasing the home consumption and enabling him to stand his ground in foreign markets.

But would the reforming manufacturers rest contented with benefits so disproportioned to their present necessities? Too probably they would not; nor would any lover of his country desire to see the work of reformation in the hands of men “mad with anguish.” But therefore shall they be denied justice? Have they a claim upon their countrymen for nothing but riot acts and dragoons? My Lord, they have a claim for sympathy; not the sympathy of up-turned eyes and pulpit admonition, but that of active benevolence and substantial justice.

You, my Lord, and your colleagues are all agreed as to the honor and policy of the late war with France. You believe it has saved and glorified the nation. You can have no doubt it has saved all your places and sinecures; but it has not saved the manufacturers, for they are starving. Nor will they readily believe that any revolution would have proved so fatal to their interests as their present glory and salvation.

Is it just the rich and powerful should have all the honor and profit, the poor all the concomitant evil? You official men loudly declare that you at least have been exalted and saved; they feel they have been ground down and ruined. Is it to be expected they should take their share of the event contentedly? You tell them, indeed, that they share their present inconveniences in common with their superiors.

God knows there are few classes in society, or rather few individuals, who have not shared in what your Lordship would denominate the blessings of our political salvation, but in what degree and proportion have they been visited on the sinecurists, borough-mongers, and men in office? They have scarcely descended very heavily on Messrs. Croker¹ and Canning.² I doubt if your Lordship has been very much impoverished by them. The shifts and privations to which they have driven my Lords Arden,³ Camden,⁴ Liverpool,⁵ and Grenville⁶ would not have a very pathetic effect beside those of the artisans of Leeds, Sheffield, Manchester, Stockport, and Birmingham. Unhappily it is no longer a question of account and balance, but of life and death. Passions, feelings, sufferings are mingled in fierce combustion: a word, a breath, a motion suffices to give birth to a conflagration extinguishable only by rivers of kindred blood.

I said the crowds of wretched and despairing manufacturers had claims to the active sympathies of justice and benevolence: they will take nothing less, and nothing less should be offered them. My Lord, you must resolve upon sacrifices if you would prevent the bursting of a tempest you have no ability to control when raised. Call your brother sinecurists together; make no appeal to their humanity, justice, or patriotism—between yourselves hypocrisy is superfluous; but address them in some such terms as these:

My friends and conjunctive admirers of our happy constitution, we all believe, or profess to believe, that our sinecures are our freehold rights, which we are resolved to do our utmost not only to maintain, but to hand down un-impaired to our children’s children; no one here suspects my sincerity in this particular; my whole life witnesses to the veneration with which I have ever regarded these noblest bulwarks of social order.

I declare to you, with the warmth of honest zeal, I would rather take a papist to my bosom than lay a finger on this ark of our freedom, except to place it in lasting security. But the times are full of trouble

¹ John Wilson Croker (1780–1857), Tory Member of Parliament for Yarmouth (1819–1820)

² George Canning (1770–1827), Tory Member of Parliament for Liverpool (1812–1823) and later Prime Minister

³ Charles George Perceval (1756–1840), Baron Arden, Tory politician

⁴ John Jeffreys Pratt (1759–1840), Earl Camden, prominent Tory politician

⁵ Robert Banks Jenkinson (1770–1828), Earl of Liverpool, Tory Prime Minister (1812–1827)

⁶ William (1759–1834), Baron Grenville, Whig Prime Minister (1806–1807)

and difficulty. These wicked manufacturers, un-mindful of the blessings which they in common with ourselves derive from our happy constitution, refuse to starve with the meekness and resignation becoming loyal subjects and good Christians. Doubtless, they merit to be cut off from the face of the earth; but so outrageous a spirit of jacobinism stalks abroad that I doubt if such a wholesome act of vigor on the part of His Majesty's ministers would meet with the support and approbation it would deserve from a loyal and enlightened people.

I state with grief what I consider the remaining alternative. Of all the harmonizing portions of our free and glorious constitution, our sinecures are the most obnoxious to the swinish multitude; they are incapable of appreciating the delicacy of a system by which individuals are rewarded, not according to their services, but their zeal and loyalty. (Here your Lordship may cast down your eyes, in which your auditors will probably feel called upon to imitate you.)

The yearly amount of these trifles, which we value chiefly as tokens of our Sovereign's approbation, may be about £100,000. The sacrifice of a sum like this, though inadequate to the cravings of these manufacturers, would do much towards persuading them the government sympathizes in their distresses. At any rate, if it failed of quieting them, it would do much towards conciliating that numerous class of persons whose mistaken pity revolts against the severity of the law, till all means of conciliation have proved ineffectual.

Gentlemen, you may believe how unwillingly I make this proposal. I shudder at the consequences of so criminal a relaxation of the reins of government; Heaven knows how much rather they need to be tightened. But if a temporary sacrifice should be the means of allaying the present disturbances, we shall have gained the time requisite to prevent a recurrence of the evil, and to repair so deadly a breach in the fabric of our glorious constitution.

My Lord, I confess it to be very doubtful if your Lordship would not consider a sacrifice of this kind as little less than sacrilege. I confess it to be doubtful if your eloquence (could you "screw your courage" to such a use of it) would prove effectual. I even doubt the sufficiency of the remedy, could it be applied. But I do not doubt that the English people will loudly profess their abhorrence of delivering their starving countrymen to legal or military execution without a single effort on the part of government towards relieving their distresses. I do not deny the government to possess physical force sufficient for their extermination. Mr. Hume has justly remarked that "of all the evils incident to human society, the insurrections of the populace, when not raised and supported by persons of higher quality, are the least to be dreaded." But the present power is not the only point for consideration.

When a system of vengeance is begun, resentment and despair will multiply victims. Their numbers will rouse attention, and engender pity. Men of all ranks will not fail to perceive that the sufferers were driven into a course of desperation, not by idleness and contumacy, but by real want; that if some of their notions are wild, and some of their demands extravagant, many, at least, are both sound and reasonable; and that they have, on the whole, much more justice on their side than such of their rulers as uphold the system by which their misery has been effected, eat the bread from their mouths by means of sinecures and taxes, insult their wretchedness by contempt and ridicule, and punish their despair with gibbets and bayonets.

My Lord, consider well before you "let slip the dogs of war" upon your native land. Unfortunately, feebleness of character is no guarantee for mildness of conduct. It is the mighty who are merciful; the weak are mis-led by the phantasms of qualities they do not possess; they mistake obstinacy for firmness; and if, as too frequently happens, they have little of the "milk of human kindness" in their bosoms, they become cruel and remorseless to conceal their natural imbecility.

Do not strive, my Lord, to become an energetic minister; your recent attempts in this way have left you no superfluous character to lavish on fresh experiments. Englishmen will ere long be called upon to decide, as

jurors, on the fate of their unhappy brethren; or, worse than this, they may be called upon to take up arms against them. In Manchester this is no longer a prospective calamity. Before it spreads further, have not we a right to demand for the mis-guided, pity; for the suffering, relief; for the oppressed, justice?

A Letter to Lord Sidmouth on the Recent Disturbances at Manchester (London: W. Hone, 1819).