

GRIEVANCES

Journeyman Weavers of London

1649

Humbly presented to the consideration of the honourable House of Commons.

All legal jurisdictions over a number of people or society of men must either be primitive or derivative. Now primitive jurisdiction is undoubtedly in the whole body, and not in one or more members, all men being by nature equal to other; and all jurisdictional power over them, being founded by a compact and agreement with them, is invested in one or more persons, who represent the whole, and by the consent of the whole are empowered to govern by such rules of equality towards all, so that both governor and governed may know certainly what the one may command and what the other must obey; without the performance of which mutual contract all obligations are cancelled, and that jurisdictional power returns unto its first spring (the people) from whence it was conveyed.

And doubtless whatever power our Governors of the Corporation of Weavers may pretend and plead for, if they had any rationally, they had it at first from the whole body, as it stands incorporated into a civil society of men walking by such rules, established for the preservation of the trade, advancement, and encouragement of the profession thereof.

And if it be objected that they had a charter granted them by the King wherein they are invested that power they challenge, we answer that there is not any one liberty that is granted to them but that is also granted to the meanest member of the said company. The words of the charter are these:

[Here follows a copy of the charter granted by King Henry II to the Weavers of London.]

So that it is clear that this grant was not to so many particular men, but to the whole society; and what power soever any person or persons were afterwards invested withal must of necessity be by the consent, election, and approbation of the whole body; and if our Egyptian taskmasters have any further commission for their usurped power over us, why do they not produce it? Certainly, if they could, they would. But having none, they plead custom and precedents, both which they will find but broken reeds to lean upon, but rotten props to support their worm-eaten sovereignty.

1. For first, there must be these two things to make a custom valid: (i) usage; (ii) time. Yet that time must be such whereof there is no memory of man, and the usage must be peaceable, without interruption. But both these are wanting to strengthen their claim to their pretended power over us.
2. Suppose there were a custom, and that it had been time out of mind also; yet if long usurpations of power could make the exercise thereof legal, the very foundation of just government were subverted.
3. No custom against an Act of Parliament is valid in law. But the custom claimed by our Governors is against the very fundamental constitutions both of all civil societies and of several Acts of Parliament, which ordain that all elections shall be free, chiefly 3 Edward I, chapter 5, by virtue of which the people choose all their officers and magistrates in the several parishes and precincts in this Kingdom. And if it be according to law in the major, the commonwealth, it must consequently hold in the minor, a particular corporation or civil society of men, as we are, etc.
4. But customs are only valid when reasonable.... Now nothing in the world can be more unreasonable than that such a number of men as 16 should have liberty to exercise a power over as many thousands without, nay, against their wills, consent, or election..., the challenge and exercise of such a power over a people being the perfectest badge of slavery that men can be subjected to.

But we shall proceed in a discovery of those oppressions and abuses which we complain so much against in our governors.

1st charge They have admitted aliens to be members for sums of money, contrary to the statutes of the Realm, orders of the Lord Mayor and Court of Aldermen, customs of the City, and ordinances of the Company.... They have brought in by their own confession three hundred and twelve strangers to be masters of the said Company, and have taken for their admittance £5 a man, which amounted to £1.560 or thereabouts.... They object that the strangers admitted are broad weavers and deal not in the commodities that we trade in; viz., ribbon, lace, etc.

The objection is false; for most of us can and many of us have wrought as good broad stuffs as are nowadays made, and would do still, were it not for the vast number of strangers (which have engrossed the trade)... And if it be demanded how or by what means they got the trade into their hands, we answer that at the beginning of the war many of us and our servants engaged for the Parliament and, in our absence, they, being generally malignant, staying at home, and keeping servants all of their own country, never employing any English, as they by law ought, by degrees got all the trading, so that now the war is ended and we returned to follow our callings, we can get no employment. By which means many hundreds have been forced to leave the trade, as to be porters, labourers, water-bearers, etc., and many forced to take relief from the several parishes wherein they dwell....

2nd charge They have admitted natives to weave and set up weaving in their guild without serving seven years, contrary to the statutes, orders, and customs aforesaid, as has been proved by several witnesses before the Committee of the honourable House.

3rd charge They exact extraordinary fees of those persons that they make free or admit, taking a silver spoon of an ounce and a half weight, and five shillings and eight-pence in money, contrary to the Statute of 22 Henry VIII, chapter 4, and 28 Henry VIII, chapter 5....

4th charge They have deprived the commonalty of their rights in their first ordinance, which says the bailiffs are to be chosen by the bailiffs, wardens, assistants, and commonalty, which ordinance is grounded upon the statute of 3 Edward I, chapter 5, which says elections ought to be free, etc.

As touching the right of election, sufficient has been spoken in the pre-amble before these charges; only give us leave to insert a few particulars in answer to their objection.

Whereas they object that the commonalty are represented in the livery of the said company, we answer: Legal representatives must be legally chosen by the persons represented, or else they cannot, or at least ought not, to be bound by their determinations. But the livery-men of our company are chosen by the Bailiffs and Governors, and not by the commonalty, so may properly be called the Governors' representatives and not ours, we being never called upon to give our voice in their elections. Neither are they, indeed, elected, but brought in for £5 a man. In lieu whereof they are invested with a peculiar privilege above others by being empowered to keep more servants than ordinary, by which means the commonalty is destroyed also....

5th charge They have dismissed the yeomanry contrary to six several orders made with their consent by the Lord Mayor and Court of Assistants. But they object that they have not dismissed them, etc. If they had not dismissed them, what needed so many several orders to be made to the contrary? But we desire you to take notice that the yeomanry did consist of sixteen persons which were authorized by the aforesaid six several orders to search and find out the abuses in trade; viz., intruders that had not served seven years, and that none but serviceable goods might be made for the commonwealth. Now, because these Governors gain by intruders, making them pay for their permission, and driving the greatest trade, making much light and deceitful work, therefore they have dismissed the said

yeomanry, by reason whereof both the said evils are continued. Besides, the yeomanry by the said orders were to have the journeymen's quarteridges for their pains, but now being by them dismissed they gather the quarteridges and share it among themselves.

6th charge That they have wasted the treasure and stock of the Company in byways, and have not made that provision for the poor members of the Company as by their trust they ought to have done. So that what with their feasting, defending vexatious suits contrary to law, purchasing a monopoly, large fees for councillors, bills, demurrers, suits against weavers of other companies, etc., they have in one year out of the Company's stock and income (which amounted but to £791 5s 8d) spent £566 19s 8d, which year's account agrees with their disbursements other years also; and for £200 given by one Mr. Kalph Hamon to purchase land for the poor, they have purchased none to this day, but have shared the money among themselves....

The premises considered, and all other circumstances duly weighed, our desires for the freedom of elections being both legal and rational, our sufferings and abuses under usurping pretended Governors so abusive and offensive, our wants so great, company so numerous, trading so little, and that too devoured by strangers... we therefore hope that all these things put together will be of such weight with all conscientious, godly men in this honourable House of Commons, as that we shall not need to fear your willing assistance for the redressing of these great evils and granting our just desires. The speedy performance whereof will not only gain unto you the prayers of many thousand persons who are ready to perish for want of trading, but also engage them, as heretofore, so for the future, to stand by you in your greatest necessities, for the strengthening your hands in the execution of justice and judgment, and redress of the oppressions of the nation.

A.E. Bland, et al., eds. *English Economic History: Select Documents* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1919):307–312