

The Eight Hour Day

When the London Trades Council suggested that there should be a ban on politicians at a demonstration in favour of the Eight Hour Day, "The People's Press" commented: "Fancy an Eight Hours Demonstration at which Mr Cunninghame Graham was not allowed to speak"¹. In the minds of those who were implicated in the working class movement, the Eight Hour Day and Cunninghame Graham were inseparably linked. Others might look into the pram and pat the baby's head and speak soothing words; he nursed it, refused to abandon it, defended it, promoted its interests, presided over its growth.

The demand for this shorter working day seems to have first been made by Robert Owen in a letter published in "The Star" of August 12th 1817. The Chartist radicals and reformers regarded him as the father of the movement associated with it. The impetus for it died away with John Fielden, MP, and it was not till the late 70's and early 80's of the century that it began to gain the attention of the leaders of the new social criticism.

In a letter to "The Iron and Coal Trades Review", Cunninghame Graham sets before the miners the advantages he sees in pressing for the shorter day. These are:

1. the absorbing of many of the employed;
2. the offering of new opportunities through leisure for intellectual improvement;
3. the availability of time for organising combination and pressing for their share of wealth they produced².

The whole position is, however better summarised by an argument with Mr Ritchie in the House, where Cunninghame Graham replies to charges made against the proposal, and Mr Ritchie, propounds the Government's attitude. After tracing the degradation of the lower classes to overwork, "more fit for mill horses than men", the former again stresses the need of the working classes for time for culture and for combination to assert their rights, and goes on to deal with objections as follows:

1. The proposal would sap men's self reliance. What? he says - at 13 hours daily for 3/- to 4/- per week?
2. There was no such demand on the part of the working classes. There ought to be, he replies. Only 10% of the workers were in trade unions. It was virtually impossible to return a working class MP. Public opinion needed to be formed which would encourage this demand.
3. It would be detrimental to foreign trade. He thinks this difficulty not insuperable.
4. Wages would fall on reduction of hours. Rather, as he replies, fresher men would turn out better work; and where shorter hours were in existence in Germany, France, Britain and America, wages had risen.

¹ "The People's Press", April 26th 1890.

² The letter is found in a Scrap-Book, and is undated.

In reply, Mr Ritchie declared what he considered would be the effect of state regulation of labour of this kind.

".....it would substitute State effort for individual effort; it would deprive the individual of the stimulus which he now possessed to better his position; it would bring the good workman down to the level of the bad workman, the thrifty to the level of the thriftless, the industrious to the level of the drunken.Working men had shown through their trade unions that they could very well take care of themselves, and they preferred to manage their own affairs and regulate their own hours of labour"¹.

"The People's Press" publishes arguments of Lord Selbourne and Mr Courtney, M P, which are based on the antagonism of the Eight Hour Day to the natural law of supply and demand, and which point out that employment must be diminished by taking away a free market². Taken together with Mr Ritchie's arguments, these sufficiently represent the terms on which the proposal was blocked and rejected.

It should be noted that Conservatives at this time applauded the old unions' powers to negotiate wages and conditions. Their popular cry "men prefer to take care of themselves through their unions" was aimed against the aspirations of the unskilled and semi-skilled to become organised, and against legislation in support of negotiation.

Cunninghame Graham saw the Eight Hour Day as affording the protection and opportunity which would foster working-class responsibility. He believed the measure was necessary to make possible the development of trade unionism; that instead of leaving men to fight to raise wages under existing conditions, it would do much to alter the economic conditions themselves³.

He maintained that it was competition for scarce jobs which lowered wages - gas workers' wages had increased as their hours were reduced⁴. In an article on "The Legal Eight Hours and the Unskilled" he shows how this competition for work arises and how it can be dealt with:

"Why does industry fluctuate? Mainly because employers engage to finish contracts by a certain time, replying on the fact of there being plenty of men always prepared to work overtime.remove the fierce competition of the unskilled with one another, give work to all by shorter hours."⁵.

How would the proposal affect foreign trade? He gives a more specific answer in an article on "Patriotism" in "The People's Press", than that given earlier in the House. He writes:

"Behind this foreign competition, then, we find the sweater firm entrenched: Patriotism is the fake he traffics in. Damage to British industry if British slaves work shorter hours. It does not signify.....a traditional brass boddle.....to the worker if trade goes or remains. His Christian wage being determined not by the amount of the product, but by competition with his fellows, it follows that it reaches just subsistence point.

¹ March 7th 1889. Hansard.

² November 15th, 1890.

³ Letter on the Eight Hour Day to "The People's Press", December 13th 1890. Cf. his insistence that he was not out to weaken trade unionism but to supplement it; September 3rd 1887 Hansard.

⁴ Letter to "The People's Press", December 13th 1890.

⁵ "The People's Press", December 27th 1890.

....Suppose the trade did leave the country, the workhouse still remains.just as well eat in the workhouse at the national expense and do no work at all¹.

The business of getting a measure through the House proved heartbreaking. On June 22nd 1887, Cunninghame Graham asked for the introduction of an Eight Hours Bill for Scotland alone in the meantime². On September 3rd of the same year a clause moved by him to limit miners' work underground to eight hours, was defeated³. Undeterred he told the House that he had spoken recently at 63 or 64 meetings in every mining district in Scotland and all had unanimously carried an Eight Hour resolution⁴. On April 6th 1889, a newspaper cutting⁵ gives the following information and comment:

"Mr Cunninghame Graham last night rose in the House of Commons to call attention 'to the long hours worked in many trades, and to the desirability of limiting the hours of labour to eight in all Government workshops, and of inserting an eight hours' clause in all future Government contracts'. Before the champion of the Eight Hours' Movement had spoken a dozen words, the House was counted out, there not being forty members present. Where were all the ranks of Separatist promisers who had advocated an Eight Hours' programme with so much energy when there were votes to be influenced in election times?"

Another newspaper cutting⁶ which must, I think, be dated 1890, draws the readers' attention to the fact that in three years Cunninghame Graham had not even succeeded in getting serious discussion in the House of the Eight Hours' question. The withdrawal of the proposal as a Bill and its re-introduction as a motion had proved unsuccessful. An attempt to get a place on the agenda by ballot had proved abortive. All the forms of the House had been exhausted. On November 29th, 1890, we read in "The People's Press": "At the request of the Trades Union Parliamentary Committee, Cunninghame Graham introduced the Eight Hours Bill (for all trades) on Wednesday. Messrs Fenwick, Pickard and Cremer had previously refused to take charge of it".

Probably the loneliness of his effort and its ill success told in the end even on him. He may have believed simply that Parliament's ear would be for ever deaf as long as things stood as they were, and re-directed his energy towards other forms of pressure. At any rate, his protagonism of the Eight Hours' Day is not so insistent from 1891 on.

But the movement was gaining strength. The International Labour Conference in Paris, and the International Congress of Miners in 1889 had declared in favour. In October 1890 the TUC adopted the Eight Hours Legal Day as part of its policy. There was a dawning national and international conviction about its benefits. I think there can be no doubt about the significance of Cunninghame Graham's part both in the British and in the World movement, or about the fact that he was at times the sole champion of this measure in Britain's Legislative Assembly.

¹ "The People's Press", September 27th 1890.

² Hansard.

³ Hansard.

⁴ During his Parliamentary career, he spent himself continuously on such widespread agitation.

⁵ Insertion in a Scrap-Book.

⁶ Insertion in a Scrap-Book.

The importance of the Eight Hours' proposition to him is witnessed not only in general by his pertinacity, but in particular by his counting the claim for Scottish and Irish Home Rule quite secondary in relation to it¹.

His views on the payment of MP's and the necessity of Worker MP's need not occupy so much attention; but he was a consistent advocate of these policies.

¹ Articles on "Midlothianism" in "The People's Press", November 14th 1890; and on "Home Rule" on December 20th 1890.

Payment of M Ps

In a letter to the Press in 1887¹ he advocated for M Ps a salary of £300 and a free pass to the constituency - acceptance to be compulsory; the payment of election expenses from the rates; freedom from obligation to subscribe to charities in the constituency, unless the member had been subscribing to these in any case before the election. Again in a letter to the Press sent on November 13th 1888, from the House, he gives reasons for his commendation of the proposal. These are:

1. Payment of members is coeval with the establishment of Parliament and almost universal among nations with Parliamentary institutions.
2. It is economical - who would think it a saving to go to an amateur lawyer or dentist?
3. It is business-like, encouraging people to make of politics a career and give it full attention.
4. It is practical - it makes the M Ps clearly delegates of constituency.
5. It is less expensive than pensions, places and contracts.
6. The well-fed present Members cannot represent the oppressed.

It is clear that his great objective was to make membership of the House open to any person, irrespective of his means.

He similarly advocated payment of Municipal Councillors. It was impossible, he declared, to secure really popular representation unless a small salary were provided to meet the attendance expenses of working men. Even when the proposition and a day's salary with travelling expenses should be provided was reduced to the motion that reasonable travelling expenses only should be met, it was defeated in the House².

Cunninghame Graham, being himself of independent means, was the best person to make this plea. Before we leave the subject, we may note how he regarded the customary subscriptions to charity expected of an MP. As a man who could afford to give these "bribes", he risked unpopularity by taking up the case of the poorer men to whom this custom proved one other barrier against membership of the House. In a letter to the press, he spoke of an attempt to extort a contribution from him towards the expenses of a Charity Concert and Ball, for the building fund of a Home for the Aged and Infirm Poor at Garngadhill. This was his comment:

"I look upon the whole system of blackmailing Members of Parliament as a most pernicious one; as it is not only a tacit infringement of the Corrupt Practices Act should a subscription be given, but is the greatest bar to poor men entering Parliament"³.

1 Preserved in a newspaper cutting, inserted in a Scrap-Book.

2 July 15th 1889. Hansard.

3 Cuttings preserved in Scrap-Book, all about 1887 and 1888.

Worker MPs

Speaking on the Eight Hours question, Cunninghame Graham wrote to miners about workers in general:

".....no man like myself, however much he may sympathise, can ever properly represent them; and I cannot help thinking that if we but had 10 or 12 Labour representatives from Scotland, that it would have been impossible to burke so important a question"¹.

It is not even the better-class workman he wants to see in Parliament. He writes to the Dundee Radical Association, concerning an English barrister who was making a poor job of representing Dundee: ".....elect men of your own class to Parliament, if you wish the institution to be a live one and not become a fossil"², and elsewhere he declares..... ".....he wanted to see Labour Members who would put down their baskets of tools in the cloakroom, and take their seats with grimy faces"³. In a statement made on March 14th 1888 he urged Liberals to choose a Labour man for the coming contest in Mid-Lanarkshire, indicating at the same time that he did not anticipate such action to provide a political cure-all:

"It is not claimed that of necessity a working man is a better representative than another, but if it is true that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump, a little leaven of labour representation might, in my opinion, be successfully introduced to leaven the mass of the House of Commons"⁴.

"Who but the poor", he writes, "can speak for the poor?"⁵. Later he gave a picture of the House of Commons as he believed it ought to be:

"The population of these islands is in the main comprised of working people. All the other interests, land, money, law, art, science, clergy and public-house keepers are but nothing to them. Therefore if Representative government has any meaning, there should be about 660 Labour members and a sort of Rump of representatives of the other great interests I have mentioned"⁶.

This, I think, sufficiently indicates his point of view concerning working class MPs. The representatives, when they become more numerous, were to disappoint him, just as those who worked with him fell down on main issues. In a letter to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, after the formation of the Labour Party proper, he says of such:

"When they get into Parliament, they are at once bitten with the absurd idea that they are no longer working men, but statesmen, and they try to behave as such....."⁷.

This did not mean that as a class they disappointed him. He had never had starry-eyed notions about them. He believed the same selfishness was in their make-up as in that of the capitalists. He roundly berated them for their own share of responsibility for their state. But he did hope they would remain straightforward working men with all their faults when they came to the House, and leaven with realism its policies. He believed

¹ Cuttings preserved in a Scrap-Book, all about 1887 or 1888.

² Introduction to "A Labour Programme", by J L Mahon.

³ Introduction to "A Labour Programme", by J L Mahon.

⁴ Cuttings preserved in a Scrap-Book, all about 1887 or 1888.

⁵ Introduction to "A Labour Programme", by J L Mahon.

⁶ Article entitled "Nations" in "The People's Press", November 15th 1890.

⁷ Letter dated March 12th 1908.

them to be the same flesh, the same bones as the dilettante "triflers at Westminster". They could not be worse than those they replaced. But he did hope that the event would prove them much better than they turned out to be.