The Examination of Dr. Benjamin Franklin

THE

EXAMINATION

OF

Doctor Benjamin Franklin,

Relative to the

REPEAL

OF THE

AMERICAN STAMP ACT,

In MDCCLXVI

MDCCLXVII.

[Price One Shilling.]

[1]

THE
EXAMINATION
OF
DOCTOR BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, &C.

Q. What is your Name, and Place of abode?

A. Franklin, of Philadelphia.

Q. Do the Americans pay and considerable taxes among themselves ?

A. Certainly many, and very heavy taxes.

Q. What are the present taxes in Pennsylvania, laid by the laws of the Colony ?

A. There are taxes on all estates real and personal, a poll-tax, a tax on all offices, prosessions, trades and businesses, according to their profits ; an excise upon all wine, rum and other spirits ; and a duty of ten pounds per head on all negroes imported, with some other duties.

Q. For what purposes are those taxes laid ?

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A. For the support of the civil and military establishments of the country, and to discharge the heavy debt contracted in the last war.

Q. How long are those taxes to continue.

A. Those for discharging the debt are to continue till 1772, and longer, if the debt should not then be all discharged. The others must always continue.

Q. Was it not expected that the debt would have been sooner discharged ?

A. It was, when the peace was made with France & Spain– But a fresh war breaking out with the Indians, a fresh load of debt was incurred, and the taxes, of course, continued loonger by a new law.

Q. Are not all the people very able to pay those taxes ?

A. No. the Frontier counties, all along the continent, having been frequently ravished by the enemy, and greatly impoverished, are albe to pay very little tax. And therefore, in consideration of their distresses, our late tax laws do expresly favour those countries, excusing the sufferers ; and I suppose the same is done in other governments.

Q. Are you not concerned in the management of the Post-Office in America ?

A. Yes, I am Deputy Post-Master General of North America.

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Q. Don’t you think the distribution of stamps, by post, to all the inhabitants, very practicable, if there was no opposition ?

A. The posts only go along the sea coasts ; they do not, except in a few instances, go back in to the country ; and if they did, sending for stamps by post would occasion an expence of postage, amounting in many cases to much more than that of the stamps themselves.

Q. Are you acquanted with Newfoundland ?

A. I was never there.

Q. Do you know whether there are any post roads on that Island ?

A. I have heard that there are no roads at all ; but that the communication between on settlement and another is by sea only.

Q. Can you disperse the stamps by post in Canada ?

A. There is only a post between Montreal and Quebec. The inhabitants live so scattered & remote from each other, in that vast country, that posts cannot be supported among them, and therefore they cannot get stamps per post. The English Colonies too, along the frontiers, are very thinly settled.

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Q. From the thinness of the back settlements,would not the stamp act be extreamly inconvenient to the inhabitants, if executed ?

A. To be sure it would ; as many of the inhabitants could not get stamps when they occasion for them, without taking long journies, and spending perhaps Three or FourPounds, that the crown might get Six pence.

Q. Are not the Colonies, from their circumstances, very able to pay the stamp-duty ?

A. In my opinion there is not gold and silver enough in the Colonies to pay the stamp duty for one year.

Q. Don’t you know that the money arising from the stamps

was all to be laid out in America ?

I know it is appropriated by the act to the American Service ; but it will be spent in the conquered Colonies, where the soldiers are, not in the Colonies that pay it.

Q. Is there not a ballance of trade due from the Colonies where the troops are posted, that will bring back the money to the old Colonies.

A. I think not. I believe very little would come back. I know of no trade likely to bring it back. I think it would come from the Colonies where it was

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spent directly to England ;
for I have always observed, that in every Colony, the more

plenty the means of the remittance to England the more goods are sent for, and the more trade with England carried on.

Q. What number of white inhabitants do you think there are in Pennsylvania ?

A. I suppose there may be about 160,000.

Q. What number of them are Quakers ?

A. Perhaps a third.

Q. What number of Germans ?

A. Perhaps another third ; but I cannot speak with certainty.

Q. Have any number of the Germans seen service, as soldiers, in Europe ?

A. Yes,–many of them both in Europe and America.

Q. Are they as much dissatisfied with the stamp duty as the English ?

A. Yes, and more ; and with reason, as their stamps are, in many cases, to be double.

Q. How many white men do you suppose there are in North America ?

A. About 300,000 from sixteen to sixty years of age.

Q. Whate may be the amount of one year's imports into Pennsylvania from Britain ?

I have been informed that our mer-

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chants compute the
imports from Britain to be above 500,000 Pounds.

Q. What may be the amount of the produce of your province exported to Britain ?

A. It must be small, as we produce little that is wanted in Britain. I suppose in cannot exceed 40,000 Pounds.

Q. How then do you pay the ballance ?

A. The ballance is paid by our produce carried to the West-Indies, and sold in our own islands, or to the French,Spaniards, Danes and Dutch ; by the same carried to other colonies in North-America, as to New-England, Nova-Scotia, Newfoundland, Carolina and Georgia ; by the same carried to different parts of Europe, as Spain, Portugal and Italy : In all which places we recive either money, bills of exhcange, or commodities that suit for remittance to Britain ; which, together with all the profits on the industry of our merchants and marines, arising in those cirucuitous voyages, and the freights made by their ships, center finally in Britain, to discharge the ballance, and pay for British manufactures continually used in the province, or sold to foreigners by our traders.

Q. Have your heard of any difficulties lately laid on the Spanish trade ?

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A. Yes, I have heard that it has been greatly obstructed by some new regulations, and by the English men of war and cutters stationed all along the coast of America.

Q. Do you think it right America should be protected by this country, and pay no part of the expence.

A. That is not the case. The colonies raised, cloathed and paid, during the last war, near 25,000 men, and spent many millions.

Q. Were you not reimbursed by parliament ?

A. We were reimbursed what, in your opinion, we had advanced beyond our proportion, or beyond what might be resonably expected from us ; and it was a very small part of what we spent. Pennsylvania, in particular, disbursed about 500,000 pounds, and the reimbursements, in the whole, did not exceed 60,000 pounds.

Q. You have said that you pay heavy taxes in Pensylvania ; what do they amount to in the pound ?

A. the tax on all estates, real and personal, is eighteen pence in the pound, fully rated ; and the tax on the profits of trades and prosessions, with other taxes, do, I suppose, make it full hald a crown in the pound.

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Q. Do you know any thing of the rate of exhcange in Pensylvania, and whether it has fallen lately ?

A. It is commonly from 170 to 175. I have heard that it has fallen lately from 175 to 162 and an half, owing, I suppose, to their lessening their orders fro goods ; and when their debts to this country are paid, I think the exchange will probably be at par.

Q. Do not you think the people of America would submit to pay the stamp dute, if it was moderated ?

A. No, never, unless compelled by force of arms.

Q. Are not the taxes in Pennsylvania laid on unequally, in order to burthen the English trade, particularly the tax on prosessions and business ?

A. It is not more burthensome in proportion than the tax on lands. It is intended, and supposed to take an equal proportion of profits.

Q. How is the assembly composed ? Of what kinds of people are members, landholders or traders ?

A. It is composed of landholders, merchantes and artificers.

Q. Are not the majority landholders ?

A. I believe they are.

Q. Do not they, as much as possible,

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shift the tax off from the land, to ease that, and lay the burthen heavier on trade?

A. I have never understood it so. I have never heard such a thing suggested : and indeed an attempt of that kind could answer no purpose. The merchant or trader is always skilled in figures, and ready with his pen and ink. If unequal burthens are laid on his trade, he puts and additional price on his goods ; and the consumers, who are chiefly landholders, finally pay the greatest part, if no the whole.

Q. What is the temper of America towards GreatBritain before the year of 1763 ?

A. The best in the world, they have submitted willingly to the government of the Crown, and paid, in all their courts, obedience to acts of parliament. Numberous as the people are in the several old provinces, they cost you nothing in forts, citadels, garrisons or armies, to keep them in subjection. They were governed by this country at the expence only of a little pen, ink and paper. They were led by a thread. They had not only a respect, but an affection, for Great Britain, for its laws, its customs and manners, and even a findness for its fashions, that greatly increased the commerce. Natives

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of Britain were always treated with particular regard ; to be an Old England-man, was, of itself, a character of some respect, and gave a kind of rank among us.

Q. And what is their temper now ?

A. O, very much altered.

Q. Did you ever hear the authority of parliament to make laws for America questioned till lately ?

A. The authority of parliament was allowed to be valid in all laws, except such as should lay internal taxes. It was never disputed in laying duties to regulate commerce.

Q. In what proportion hath the population increased in America ?

A. I think the inhabitants of all the provinces together, taken at a medium, double in about 25 years. But their demand for British manufactures increased much faster, as the comsumption is not merely in proportion to their numbers, but grows with the growing abilities of the same numbers to pay for them. In 1723, the whole importation from Britain to Pennsylvania, was but about 15,000 l. sterling ; it is now near hald a million.

Q. In what light did the people of America use to consider the parliament of Great Britain ?

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A. They considered the parliament as the great bulwark & security of their liberties and privileges, and always spoke of it with the utmost repsect and veneration : arbitrary ministers, they thought, might possibly, at times, attempt to oppress them, but they relied on it, that the parliament, on application, would always give redress. They remembered, with gratitude, a strong instance of this, when a bill was brought into parlia-
ment with the clause to make royal instructions laws in the colonies, which the house of commons would not pass, and it was thrown out.

Q. And have they not still the same respect for parliament ?

A. No ; it is greatly lessened.

Q. To what cause is that owing ?

A. To a concurrence of causes ; the restraints lately laid on their trade, by which the bringing of foreign gold and silver into the colonies was prevented ; the prohibition of making paper money among themselves ; and then demanding a new

and heavy tax by stamps ; taking away at the same time, trials by juries, and refusing to receive & hear their humble petitions.

Q. don't you think they would submit to the stamp-act, if it was modified, the

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obnoxious parts taken out, and the duties reduced to some particulars, of small moment.

A. No ; they will never submit to it.

Q. What do you think is the reason that the people of America increase faster than in England.

A. Because they marry younger, and more generally.

Q. Why so ?

A. Because any young couple that are industrious may easily obtain land of their own, on which they can raise a family.

Q. Are not the lower rank if people more at their ease in America than in England ?

A. They may be so if they are sober and diligent, as they are better paid for their labor.

Q. What is your opinion of a future tax, imposed on the same principle with that of the stamp-act; how would the Americans receive it ?

A. Just as they do this. They would not pay it.

Q. Have you not heard of the resolutions of this house, and of the house of lords, asseting the right of parliament relating to America, including a power to tax people there ?

A. Yes, I have heard of such resolutions.

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Q. What will be the opinion of the Americans on those resolutions ?

A. They will think them unconstitutional, and unjust.

Q. Was it an opinion in America before 1763, that the parliament had no right to lay taxes and duties there ?

A. I never heard any objection to the right of laying duties to regulate commerce ; but a right to lay internal taxes was never supposed to be in parliament, as we are not represented there.

Q. On what do you found your opinion, that the people in America made any such distinction ?

A. I know that whenever the subject has occurred in conversation where i have been present, it has appeared to be the opinion of every one, that we could not be taxed in a parliament where we were not represented. But the payment of duties laid by act of parliament, as regulations of commerce was never disputed.

Q. But can you name any act of assembly, or puclick act of any of your governments, that made such distinction ?

A. I do not know that there was any ; I think there was never an occasion to make any suck act, till now that you have attempted to tax us ; that has occasioned resolutions of assembly, declaring the dis-

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tinction, in which I think every assembly on the continent, and every memeber in every assembly, have been unanimous.

Q. What then could occasion conversations on that subject before that time.

A. There was in 1754 a proposition made (I think it came from hence) that is case of a war, which was then apprehended, the governors of the colonies should meet, and order the levying of troops, building of forts, and taking every other necessary measure for the general defence ; and should draw on the treasury here for the sums expended, which were afterwards to be raised in the colonies by a general tax, to be laid

on them by act of parliament. This occaisioned a good deal of conversatioin on the subject, and the general opinion was, that the parliament neither would nor could lay any tax on us, till we were duly represented in parliament, bacause it was not just, nor agreeable to the nature of an English constitution.

Q. Don't you know there was a time in New-York, when it was under consideration to make an application to parliament to lay taxes on that colony, upon a deficiency arising from the assembly's refusing or neglecting to raise the necessary supplies for the support of the civil government ?

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A. I never heard of it.

Q. There was such an application under consideration in New-York ; and do you apprehend they could suppose the right of parliament to lay a tax in America was only local, and confined to the case of a deficiency in a particular colony, by a refusal of its assembly to raise the necassary supplies ?

A. They could not suppose such a case, as that the assembly would not raise the necessary supplies to support its own government. An assembly that would refuse it must want common sense, which cannot be supposed. I think there was never any such case at New-York, and that it must be a misrepresentation, or the fact must be misunderstood. I know there have been some attempts, by ministerial instructions from hence, to oblige the assemblies to settle permanent salaries on governors, which they wisely refused to do ; but I believe no assembly of New-York, or any other colony, ever refused duly to support government by proper allowance, from time to time, to public officers.

Q. But in case a governor, acting by instruction, should call on an assembly to raise the necessary supplies, and the assembly should refuse to do it, do you not

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think it would then be for the good of the people of the colony, as well as necessary to government, that the parliament should tax them ?

A. I do not think it owuld be necessary. If an assembly could possibly be so absurd as to refuse raising the supplies requisite for the maintenance of government among them, they could not long remain in such a situation ; the disorders and confusion occaisioned by it must soon bring them to reason.

Q. If it should not, ought not the right to be in Great-Britain of applying a remedy ?

A. The right only to be used in such a case, I should have no objection to, supposing it to be used meerely for the good of the people of the Colony.

Q. But who is to judge of that, Britain or the Colony ?

A. Those that feel can best judge.

Q. You say the Colonies have always submitted to external taxes, and object to the right of parliament only in laying internal taxes ; now can you shew that there is any kind of difference between the two taxes to the Colony on which they may be laid ?

A. I think the difference is very great. An external tax is a duty laid on commo-

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dities imported ; that duty is added to the first cost, and other charges on the commodity, and when it is offered to sale, makes a part of the price. If the people do not like it at that price, they refuse it ; they are not obliged to pay it. But an internal tax is forced from the people without their consent, if not laid by their own representatives. The stamp-act says, we shall have no commerce, make no exchange of property with each other, neither purchase nor grant, nor recover debts ; we shall neither marry, nor amke our wills, unless we pay such & such sums ; and thuse it is intended to extort our money from us, or ruin us by the consequences of refusing to pay it.

Q. But supposing the external tax or duty to be laid on the
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necessaries of life imported into your Colony, will not that be the same thing in its effects as an internal tax ?

A. I know not a single article imported into the northern Colonies, but what they can either do without, or make themselves.

Q. Don’t you think cloth from England absolutely necessary to them ?

A. No, by no means absolutely necessary ; with industry and good management, they may very well supply themselves with all they want.

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Q. Will it not take a long time to establish that manufacture among them ? and must they not in the mean while suffer greatly ?

A. I think not. They have made a surprising progress already. And I am of opinion, that before their old cloths are worn out, they will have new ones of their own making.

Q. Can they possibly find wool enough in North-America ?

A. They have taken steps to increase the wool. They entered into general combinations to eat no more lamb, and very few lambs were killed last year. This course persisted in, will soon make a prodigious difference in the quantity of wool. And the establishing of great manufactories, like those in the clothing towns here,is not necassary, as it is where the business is to be carried on for the purposes of trade. The people will all spin, and work for themselves, in their own houses.

Q. Can there be wool and manufacture enough in one or two years ? A. In three years, I think they may.

Q. Does not the severity of the winters in the Northern Colonies, occasion the wool to be of bad quality ?

A. No ; the wool is very fine and good.

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Q. In the more Southern Colonies, as in Virginia : do’nt you know that the wool is coarse, and only a kind of hair.

A. I don’t know it. I never heard it. Yet I have been sometimes in Virginia. I cannot say I ever took particular notice of

the wool there, but I believe it is good, though I cannot speak positive of it ; but Virginia, and the colonies south of it, have less occasioin for wool ; their winters are short and not very severe, and they can very well clothe themselves with linnen and cotton of their own raising for the rest of the year.

Q. Are no the people, in the more Northern Colonies, obliged to fodder their sheep all the winter ?

A. In some of the most Northern Colonies they may be obliged to do it some part of the winter.

Q. Considering the resolutions of parliament, as to the right, do you think, if the stamp-act is repealed, that the North-Americans will be satisfied ?

A. I believe they will.

Q. Why do you think so ?

A. I think the resolutions of right will give them very little concern, if they are never attempted to be carried into practice. The Colonies will probably consider themselves in the same situation, in

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that respect, with Ireland ; they know you claim the same right with regard to Ireland, but you never exercise it. And they may believe you never will exercise it in the Colonies, any more than in Ireland, unless on some very extraordinary occasion.

Q. But who are to be judges of that extraordinary occasion ? Is it not the parliament.

A. Though the parliament may judge of the occasion, the people, will think it can never exercise such a right, till representatives from the Colonies are admitted into parliament, &that whenever the occasion arises, representatives will be ordered.

Q. Did you never hear that Maryland, during the last war, had refused to furnish a quota towards the common defence ?

A. Maryland has been misrepresented in that matter. Mary-

land, to my knowledge, never refused to contribute, or grant aids to the Crown. The assemblies every year, during the war, voted considerable sums, and formed bills to raise them. The Bills were according to the constitution of that province, sent up to the council, or upper house, for concurrence, that they might be presented to the governor, in order to be enacted into laws.

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Unhappy disputes between the two houses, arising from the defects of that constitution principally, rendered all the bills but one or two abortive, The proprietary's council rejected them. It is true Maryland did not continue its proportion, but it was, in my opinion, the fault of the government, not of the people.

Q. Was it not talked of in the other provinces as a proper measure to apply to parliament to compel them ?

A. I have heard such discourse ; but as it was well known,that the people were not to blame, now such application was ever made, nor any step taken towards it.

Q. Was it not proposed at a public meeting ?

A. Not that I know of.

Q. Do you remember the abolishing of the paper currency in New-England, by act of assembly ?

A. I do remember its being abolished, in the Massachusetts Bay.

Q. Was not Lieutenant Governor Hutchinson principally concerned in that transaction ? A. I have heard so.

Q. Was it not at that time a very unpopular law ?

A. I believe it might, though I can say little about it, as I lived at a distance from the province.

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Was not the scarcity of gold and silver an argument used against abolishing the paper ?

A. I suppose it was.

Q. What is the present opinion there of that law ? Is it as unpopular as it was at first ?

A. Think it is not.

Q. Have not instructions from hence been sometimes sent over to governors, highly oppressive and unpolitical ?

A. Yes.

Q.Have not some governors dispensed with them for that reason ?

A. Yes ; I have heard so.

Q. Did the Americans ever dispute the controling [controlling] power of parliament to regulate the commerce ? A. No.

Q. Can any thing less than a military force carry the stamp act into execution ?

A. I do not see how a military force can be applied to that purpose. Q. Why may it not ?

A. Suppose a military force sent into America, they will find nobody in arms ; what are they then to do ? They cannot force a man to take stamps who chooses to do without them. They will not find a rebellion ; they may indeed make one.

Q. If the act is not repealed, what do you think will be the consequences ?

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A. A total loss of the respect and affection the people of America bear to this country, and of all the commerce that on that respect and affection.

Q. How can the commerce be affected ?

A. You will find, that if the act is not repealed, they will take very little of your manufactures in a short time.

Q. Is it in their power to do without them ?

A. I think they may very well do without them ?

Q. Is it their interest not to take them ?

A. The goods they take from Britain are either necessaries, mere conveniencies, or superfluities. The first, as cloth, &c. with a little industry, they can make at home ; the second they can do without, till they are able to provide them among themselves ; and the last, which are much the greatest part, they will strike off immediately. they are mere articles of fashion, purchased and consumed, because the fashion in a respected country, but will now be detested and rejected. The people have already struck off, by general agreement, the use of all goods fashionable in mournings, and many thousand pounds worth are sent back as unsaleable.[…]

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Q. If the stamp act should be repealed, would it induce the assemblies of America to acknowledge the rights of parliament to tax them, and would they erase their resolutions ? A. no, never.

Q. Is there no means of obliging them to erase those resolutions ?

A. None that I know of ; they will never do it unless compelled by force of arms.

Q. Is there no power on earth that can force them to erase them ?

A. No power, how great foever, can force men to change their opinions.

Q. Do they consider the post-office as a tax, or as regulation ?

A. Not as a tax, but as a regulation and conveniency ; every assembly encouraged it, and supported it in its infancy, by grants of money, which they would not otherwise have done ; and the people have always paid the postage.

Q. When did you receive the instructions you mentioned ?

A. I brought them with me, when I came to England, about 15 months since.

Q. When did you communicate that instruction to the minister ?

A. Soon after my arrival, while the stamping of America was under consideration, and before the bill was brought in.

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Q. Would it be most for the interest of Great-Britain, to employ the hands of Virginia in Tobacco, or in manufactures ?

A. Is tobacco to be sure.

Q. What used to be the pride of the Americans? A. To indulge in the fashions and manufactures of G. Britain. Q. What is now their pride ? A. To wear their old cloaths over again, till they can make new ones.

Withdrew

THE END

Th Jefferson MONTICELLO