

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

# The Channel Tunnel:

SHOULD THE DEMOCRACY TO OPPOSE  
OR SUPPORT IT?

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I WENT down to the House of Commons on August 3rd intending to speak and vote in favor of the second reading of the Channel Tunnel Experimental Works Bill, but on the appeal made first by the Chairman of Committees, and repeated by the leader of the House—an appeal also concurred in by Mr. John Morley, speaking on behalf of the front Opposition bench—I refrained from speaking, and contented myself with a silent vote in favor of the measure. Since then I find such a concurrence of opinion in the press hostile to the Channel Tunnel that I think it my duty to publicly state my reasons for my vote, especially as Sir Edward Watkin, in moving the Bill, directly asked for an expression of opinion from the English democracy, and on the division being taken the representatives of labor in the House were in opposing lobbies on the question. A circular signed by Mr. C. Sheath, Secretary *pro tem.* of the Channel Tunnel Company, clearly stated the objects of the Bill voted on, *i.e.*, “To authorise the promoters to prosecute the experimental works which they have commenced at their own cost under authority granted

by Parliament in 1874, to test the practicability of constructing a tunnel beneath the Straits of Dover"; and explained that "the Bill empowers her Majesty's Government, in the event of the experimental works proving successful, to sanction the prosecution of permanent works under such conditions and safeguards as the Government in their absolute discretion may impose. The experimental works for which permission is now sought will be made upon the promoters' own property and at their own cost. The public are not asked to contribute towards the work, which will not impose any pecuniary obligation upon the country."

I, however, quite admit that those who are prepared to support the experimental works ought also to be prepared—in the event of these workings proving successful—to authorise the construction of a complete working tunnel, and that any objections which might be valid as against the complete undertaking ought to be admitted as conclusive against the experimental proposal. I am personally in favor of the Channel Tunnel because I believe it would promote peaceful relations between the peoples of France and England. I am not a shareholder in either the French or English scheme solely because I have not the pecuniary means to acquire shares.

I believe that peaceful relations between Great Britain and Europe would be rendered more probable by the facilities afforded for commercial intercommunication. I hold that the more peoples trade with each other, the more they know one another, the less likely they are to fight one another. It is because I am in favor of peace between France and England that I am in favor of the Channel Tunnel. Here I only reaffirm what was so well

said by the late Richard Cobden, speaking on this very question of a tunnel between England and the Continent: "It is not enough to put the Government and the higher classes of each country on a friendly footing; that good feeling ought to penetrate the masses of the two nations; and it is our duty to multiply all the means for an incessant contact, which will certainly put an end to superannuated prejudices and old ideas of antagonism."

The horribly increased and always augmenting European army and navy expenditure of the last twenty-five years, the British share of which Lord Randolph Churchill now strongly denounces, can only be efficiently checked by concurrent and decided peace action on the part of all European peoples. The great need for early disarming is admitted. The peaceful co-operation of France and England would enable each, relying on the other's good will, to waste less money in warlike preparations. It is in this interest that I support the proposed submarine pathway between this island and the Continent. I believe that increased facilities for friendly intercourse would promote and secure the peaceful co-operation I desire.

Something has already been done towards showing that the Channel betwixt Kent and the Pas de Calais can be tunnelled. Last year I visited the works, near Shakspeare's Cliff, on the west of Dover, and penetrated under the sea to the place where the engine, worked by compressed air, had bored from England through the greyish clay chalk  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles in the direction of France. I found the piece of tunnel already executed quite dry; the air was perfectly pure, the ventilation being provided by the compressed air which works the boring machine; and the work of tunnelling—which under the supervision of a Government official was allowed

to be continued for a few seconds—seemed astonishingly easy, as the revolution of the machine cut the chalk away and delivered it into the waggon behind ready for removal. The experimental tunnel is bored in the strata which are supposed to represent the continuous earth surface—between what are now the coasts of France and England—in prehistoric times when the land, now these islands, formed part of the great European continent. Messieurs Lavalley, Larousse, Potier, and Lapparent, in their report to the French Channel Tunnel Company, presented in 1877, say: “Examination of the cliffs on each coast of the Straits shows that the geological strata are the same in the area which concerns us, and which includes especially the cretaceous formation. On both sides are the same strata, with the same characteristics, and, remarkable to say, with the same thickness. Hence the presumption—authorised indeed by other considerations—that in the prehistoric period, instead of an arm of the sea, separating two coasts, there stretched here a continuous, more or less undulating, plain, between the points at which have since been built Calais and Boulogne on the one side, Folkestone and Dover on the other. According to this hypothesis, the Straits would be due to the gradual erosion of a soil of slight consistency, such as the cretaceous formation in general, which yielded before the ceaseless repetition of blows from the waves of the Northern Sea, a sea so stormy during the rougher months of the year. From this we gather the hope that the strata encountered beneath the sea, through which the tunnel must be driven, will be free from serious dislocations, and will only present slight undulations to which it will generally be possible to conform the plan of the subterranean railway without any great difficulty.

“This hope is confirmed by the following circumstance: the strata of the chalk formation on the two sides of the Straits, although thrown out of the horizontal plane they first occupied, have not acquired a steep inclination. The inclination is always slight. Over the greater part of the area of the Straits, starting from France, the gradient is but  $\frac{1}{7}$ , a fact that seems to indicate that the force of the upheaval which threw the strata out of the horizontal plane was not violent.”

I am told that on the French side a similar boring to the one which I visited near Dover has been made towards this country, so that about one-eighth of the experimental work has already been executed. Why is it not continued to completion? The promoters on both sides are ready enough; the French Government is willing; but the British Government—influenced as I think by the worst form of national prejudice—absolutely forbids further working on this side, and the French are of course unwilling to continue costly works—which can only be completed with our full consent—until that consent is officially secured. The only reason for objecting to the Channel Tunnel is that it will render us specially liable to invasion. Some contend that the Tunnel will not pay; but that, as the British Government said thirteen years ago, is rather the business of those who, believing in the probabilities of its financial success, are willing to risk their moneys in the hope of reasonable financial profit. The war danger is the only cry to which the democracy need pay any attention. When the matter was discussed between the Governments of Great Britain and France thirteen years ago, this war danger was examined by the Government of the day of this country

and dismissed as not serious. In a despatch from the Foreign Office to Count de Jarnac, the French Ambassador, dated 24th December, 1874, the Earl of Derby wrote that "Her Majesty's Government consider that it is for the promoters of the undertaking to weigh well the questions of the physical possibility of the undertaking, and its probable financial success; but they see no objection to the proposed preliminary concession to the French promoters, for the execution of the preliminary works, for a term of three years, nor to the concession of five years for making a definite contract with an English Company for the completion of the undertaking, on the understanding that, should the promoters fail to fulfil these conditions, the land in England occupied by them, and the works upon it, should revert to the Crown, or other present owners thereof, so that the occupation of the land by a Company which has failed, may not stand in the way of any other undertaking.

"Her Majesty's Government have no objection to offer to the proposed grant to the promoters of a monopoly for thirty years after the final completion of and opening of the tunnel, nor to the concession itself extending to a period of ninety-nine years from the same date, the question being reserved of some limitation being imposed as to the date of the final completion."

And it is clear that the military side of the question had not been overlooked, for Lord Derby in a dispatch of the same date to Lord Lyons says: "In regard to the reference made in the papers received from Count de Jarnac to the military necessities of either country, her Majesty's Government will only now observe that they must retain absolute power not only to erect and maintain such works



at the English mouth of the tunnel as they may deem expedient, but also, should they apprehend danger of war, or of intended war, to stop traffic through the tunnel; and it remains to be considered whether they should not have the right to exercise their power without claim for compensation."

Nor was the military question neglected or glossed over, for two months later the following memorandum was submitted to the Surveyor-General of Ordnance by Sir W. Drummond Jervois, Deputy-Director of Works, on 3rd March, 1875, Sir Frederick Chapman being at that time the Inspector-General of Fortifications :

"MEMORANDUM WITH REFERENCE TO THE PROPOSED  
TUNNEL BETWEEN ENGLAND AND FRANCE.

"There appears to be no military objection to the proposed tunnel, provided due precautions be adopted.

"Should this country, in alliance with France, be at war with another Continental power, the existence of the tunnel might be advantageous.

"Should this country be at war with France, the proposed tunnel could no doubt be readily closed. Having regard, however, to the possibility of the tunnel being unnecessarily injured under the influence of panic, and to the probable cost of repairing such injury, it is desirable to obviate, as far as possible, the necessity for adopting extreme measures, and with this object to pay due regard to defensive considerations in the construction of the tunnel.

"Moreover, unless proper military precautions be taken, it might under some circumstances happen that France might be able, in anticipation of a declaration of war, to

send a body of troops through the tunnel, and thus obtain an important military advantage. Such a body of troops could readily intrench themselves, and could be rapidly reinforced.

“If, however, suitable defensive arrangements are made, such an undertaking would be impracticable, and even in case of war being imminent, no fears need be entertained which might lead to the partial destruction of this costly work.”

In April, 1876, the French Ambassador at the Court of St. James applied on behalf of *La Société Française Concessionnaire du Chemin de Fer Sous-Marin entre la France et l'Angleterre* for the permission of her Majesty's Government to take soundings in British waters near Dover for the purpose of ascertaining the nature of the bottom of that part of the English Channel, and the Board of Trade were informed by the Lords Commissioners of her Majesty's Treasury, on the 10th June following, that the necessary application had been granted.

Although a Channel Tunnel Company, with Lord Stalbridge (then Lord R. Grosvenor) as chairman, had obtained an Act of Parliament in 1875 authorising the commencement of experimental tunnelling works, nothing was really done by way of submarine boring from the English coast until the summer of 1880, when the borings just referred to were commenced by the South Eastern Railway, which obtained special powers from Parliament in 1881 for continuing the work and purchasing the necessary land. These works and powers were taken over and continued in 1882 by the Submarine Continental Railway Company, Limited. The new company, however, found itself almost immediately interrupted in the work by the

intervention of the English Government, such intervention being the result of a panic created by military alarmists.

In August, 1881, the Board of Trade wrote to the Admiralty that "the work of forming a subway under the Channel was making considerable progress", and that "public susceptibility having been aroused as to possible danger to this country from a tunnel under the Channel", the Board desired "to be fortified with the opinion of the naval and military authorities".

In January, 1882, Admiral Cooper Key sounded the panic trumpet, and did much to excite the opposition which has, up to the present, proved fatally obstructive to the progress of the English borings.

In May, 1882, a memorandum—most important because issued after the panic opposition had got into full cry—was issued by Sir John Adye, then Surveyor-General of the Ordnance, embodying the report of a military committee, presided over by General Sir A. Alison, which had been instructed to consider "the means by which, supposing the Channel Tunnel completed, its use could be interdicted to an enemy in time of war". Sir J. Adye says: "The military precautions necessary to provide against such a contingency almost naturally divide themselves into two parts:—1. The defence or command of the exit by means of batteries and fortifications. 2. The closing or destruction of the tunnel itself, either temporarily or permanently, both as regards its land and submarine portions. The Committee have dealt with both points in some detail. As regards the former they urge, that whilst the land portion of the tunnel should be constructed in the vicinity of a fortress, it is also important that its exit should lie outside but under the full command of the

batteries in the outworks of the fortress itself. With respect to the partial closing or entire destruction of the tunnel, both in its land and submarine portions, the Committee have entered into various details, and have made numerous proposals by which, if necessary, these objects may be accomplished. According to my judgment their recommendations, both as to defence and closure, are sound and practical, can be carried on without great cost or difficulty, and will amply suffice for the objects in view. I agree with them that the general line of the land portion of the tunnel had better be constructed not far from the lines of a fortress, whilst the exit should also be under the command of the guns of its outworks. Such a disposition of the tunnel will facilitate the arrangements in respect to the preparation of mines, etc., whilst a full command of the mouth will render its use or occupation by an enemy practically impossible. The various details and proposals of the Committee as to obstruction and closure, partial or permanent, are such as, I think, will commend themselves to engineers, civil or military, as being efficacious for the purpose; and I would further point out that whilst they are comparatively simple, it is evident they can be multiplied indefinitely, and have the further advantage, that the possession of the tunnel and its exit by an enemy would not prevent their being carried into effect; and even should some of them fail, such a contingency would not necessarily entail the failure of others. The means of obstruction, in short, are not only various but are independent of each other, and many of them could be improvised or multiplied even at the last moment. Nothing, indeed, is more obvious than the facility with which the tunnel can be denied to an enemy,

by means which no vigilance on his part could prevent or remove." And yet the British democracy are in 1887 asked to reject the tunnel scheme because a real or counterfeit fear, in any case begotten of ignorance and prejudice, has seized on some of our "great generals" and hysterical journalists.

In April, 1883, a joint Select Committee of the Lords and Commons, five members from each House, was appointed "to inquire whether it is expedient that Parliamentary sanction should be given to a submarine communication between England and France; and to consider whether any or what conditions should be imposed by Parliament in the event of such communication being sanctioned". This Committee, presided over by the Marquis of Lansdowne, held fifteen sittings, but although several draft reports were prepared none was accepted, but the majority of the Committee, six against four, were of "opinion that it is not expedient that Parliamentary sanction should be given to a submarine communication between England and France". The minority report presented by Lord Lansdowne is a paper of remarkable ability, and sets out with great clearness the reasons for and against the proposed tunnel.

General Sir Edward Hamley, M.P., who rose to speak against the tunnel, as I rose to speak in its favor, but who did not deliver his speech for the same reason which kept me silent, wrote a letter to the *Times*, which the editor, also hostile to the tunnel, says, "contrasts the position of an invading army which had succeeded in effecting a landing before a tunnel was formed with that of such an army in the event of a tunnel being constructed—its helplessness and peril, the difficulty in getting supplies

or reinforcements, the risk that we should again obtain command of the Channel in the former case, and the power to draw indefinite supplies through the tunnel in the latter case. The letter brings into relief the fact that even if we succeeded in preventing an invader from coming on our soil by means of this communication, it would be a great aid to invaders who had actually made good their footing otherwise." "The possession of both ends would render the invader independent of the sea. . . . Night and day a stream of troops and supplies would be pouring through the tunnel, possibly under the keels of our victorious but helpless Channel fleet. Now, in this case—and I would impress this point—it would no longer be a contest between two armies, but between the entire military resources of France on the one side and what we could oppose on the other.' Thus a tunnel makes hostile occupation, if not invasion, easier."

I submit that this is really carrying panic to madness point, for, if an invading army, large enough and strong enough to capture Dover, had landed otherwise than through the tunnel, our state must have become so hopeless that discussion as to how such an enemy would get supplies and reinforcement would cease to be material. Such an army so invading England, otherwise than by the tunnel, would be as dangerous to England whether or not the tunnel existed.

The view now put forward by Sir E. Hamley was fully raised and considered in 1883, and discussed in the Minority Report of Lord Lansdowne, Lord Aberdare, the Right Hon. W. E. Baxter, and Mr. Peel, now Speaker of the House of Commons. The editor of the *Times* treats Sir E. Hamley's objection as not having been answered ;

but it was in truth exhaustively examined and completely answered in that Report. In paragraph 92 the Report examines *seriatim* the principal apprehensions expressed for the safety of the tunnel. "These are to the effect that it might pass into the hands of an enemy—

"(1) By surprise, effected through the tunnel itself;

"(2) By surprise, effected by a force landed in the neighborhood of the tunnel, with or without the aid of troops passed through the tunnel;

"(3) By surprise, facilitated by treachery;

"(4) After investment by an invading force;

"(5) By cession as the condition of a disastrous peace."

All these apprehensions are really expressions of fear of hostility from France. If anyone of these apprehensions had carried weight with Italy, Germany, or France, the St. Gothard Tunnel, or the Mont Cenis Tunnel would never have been made. The three suppositions, 1, 2, and 3, are possible in case of an attempt made by Frenchmen when France and England are both at peace, and indeed this is Lord Wolseley's contention. "The seizing of the tunnel by a *coup de main* is, in my opinion," says his lordship, "a very simple operation, *provided it be done without any previous warning or intimation whatever* by those who wish to invade the country." "My contention is, that were a tunnel made, England, as a nation, could be destroyed *without any warning whatever, when Europe was in a condition of profound peace*. . . . the whole plan is based upon the assumption of its being carried out *during a time of profound peace between the two nations*, and whilst we were enjoying life in the security and unsuspection of a fool's paradise."

My short answer to this wild contention is that all

intercourse between nations would be impossible and life would be unendurable, if in time of "profound peace" we are always to treat neighboring nations as ever ready without provocation to suddenly assail our shores in order to rob and destroy. The European experience of the past century is entirely against the monstrous contention put forward by Lord Wolseley that France might suddenly surprise us whilst we were in peace and alliance with her and all European powers. It is an insult to suspect our French neighbors of any such possible treason. The repetition of such insulting suspicions is in itself a provocation. In modern times there is no instance of any outbreak of hostilities between two great powers which has not been preceded at least by rumors and expressions of uneasiness and highly strained diplomatic negotiations on the points likely to culminate in rupture of peaceful relations. Yet, except on such a traitorous surprise, Lord Wolseley himself guarantees the safety of the tunnel, for he says that, if sufficient notice were to be given, "fifty men at the entrance of the tunnel can prevent an army of 100,000 men coming through it".

The strongest military objections to the proposed tunnel are those stated with considerable literary skill, heightened by strong flavor of romance, in the long Memorandum of Adjutant-General Sir Garnet (now Lord) Wolseley, dated 16th June, 1882. The weight of Lord Wolseley's objections on military grounds is a little weakened by the almost special pleading in which he indulges on the commercial and diplomatic aspects of the question. The whole attitude of Lord Wolseley towards the Channel tunnel is that of an advocate who has a very hostile brief. He is not in this memorandum a serious military



counsellor, warning his countrymen against real dangers. He has recourse to poetry, pathos, general denunciation of treaties as valueless, and to tricks of curiously irrelevant appeal to national passion and national fear.

Every objection stated by Lord Wolseley was seriously weighed by Lord Lansdowne and those who concurred in the minority report.

“With regard to the possibility of seizing the English end of the tunnel by means of a small force landed in its neighborhood,” Lord Lansdowne and those concurring with him report: “we have endeavored to ascertain precisely the conditions, of which the presence would be indispensable if such an attempt were to have any chance of success. Those conditions would, we understand, be the following:

“(1.) It would be necessary that the invading force should be despatched with absolute secrecy.

“(2.) That it should cross the Channel unobserved and unmolested by our fleet.

“(3.) That the state of the weather should offer no difficulties to the disembarkation.

“(4.) That its landing should be effected without hindrance.

“(5.) That it should advance without molestation from the point at which it might be landed to the works by which the exit of the tunnel would be protected.

“(6.) That it should find the garrison in a state of absolute unpreparedness.

“(7.) That it should succeed in carrying by a simultaneous rush the whole of the various works surrounding the exit of the tunnel.

“(8.) That this capture should be effected so rapidly as

to render it impossible for the defenders of those works to have recourse to any of the means which would be in existence for the purpose of closing or destroying the tunnel, *or*, that the whole of those means should simultaneously chance to be out of working order.

“That every one of these conditions should be present at the same time appears to us most improbable. We can well conceive that, with the rapid communications now available for the movement of troops by land or sea, a force such as that contemplated might be collected and despatched, and possibly reach our coasts without warning. That its landing, formation, and forward movement could altogether escape detection we can scarcely conceive. It would, we learn from Admiral Rice, take twelve hours, even under the most favorable conditions, and assuming the landing to be unresisted, to land 20,000 men, the force contemplated by Sir Lintorn Simmons. Such a force could not, however, in Admiral Rice’s opinion, be landed without attracting attention. A smaller body could, of course, be landed with greater rapidity, but the diminution of its numbers would not increase its chance of success. A force of 1,000 men could, Sir Cooper Key informs us, be landed under favorable circumstances in an hour; ‘the larger the number of men,’ however, this witness adds, ‘the more the difficulties that would arise against the time, but I have no hesitation in saying, that if they were equipped for it, with boats properly prepared, and a good clear beach, they could land 10,000 men under ten hours.’ That such a force, or one approaching to it in strength, should be able to traverse without detection or hindrance, the distance intervening between the point of landing and the exit of the tunnel, which, unless the recommendations

of the military committee are altogether disregarded, would be at a considerable distance from the shore, appears to us difficult to conceive; were it to be detected, and the alarm given, the complete surprise of the garrisons of the different forts would no longer be possible."

One most extraordinary objection to the tunnel was gravely urged before the joint Committee of Lords and Commons in the evidence by the late Mr. Eckroyd, M.P. for Preston, in answer to a suggestive question from the Earl of Devon: "EARL OF DEVON: You spoke of the probable influence you anticipated from the introduction of French labor upon the pecuniary interests of the British workman in the manufacturing departments of industry with which you are concerned; does it occur to you that any other evil might arise by the spread of Socialistic or Communistic views from an increased intercourse between the large body of French and English workmen?—MR. E.: That is an apprehension that is very often felt; and I believe we have found that, specially in periods of slackness of employment and discontent, there would be an active propaganda of an Atheistic and Socialistic kind." As though any ideas now circulated in France or on the Continent could be hindered from permeating here by mere refusal to construct a submarine tunnel! Lord Wolseley and the Duke of Cambridge fear that French soldiers may conquer us bodily, coming for that purpose secretly through the tunnel. The Earl of Devon and Mr. Eckroyd have like fears of French Atheists and Socialists, who would find in the Channel tunnel a convenient conduit-pipe for their propaganda!

The great plague of Europe just now, and one that has been increasing in its virulence and oppressiveness for the

last quarter of a century, is the huge waste of men and material in every European country in preparing for armed offence and defence. If the figures compiled by Mr. Lewis Appleton are correct, then during the year ending 31st December, 1886, Europe had under arms, not including reserves, no less than 4,123,675 men, and the European forces available for war, including reserves, were 16,697,484. In 1886 Europe spent on army and navy no less than £187,474,522. Unless there be disarmament, there must be fierce war or terrible revolution. The burden of increasing taxation is too continuously heavy for long peaceful bearing. The rulers find pride and pomp in the controlling and array of huge masses of armed men. It is the peoples who pay and suffer.

Commerce is an eloquent peace preacher; the frequent and more complete intermingling of unarmed peoples begets distaste for war; national prejudices die away under frequent contact; explanations are easier as peoples know one another better. I am in favor of this Channel tunnel because it will give to us in this island easier means of seeing our European brethren in their own cities. It will afford to the folk of France the opportunity of knowing for themselves that the English workmen do not desire quarrel or war.

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