

Mecklenburg



Hon. Abraham Rencher
Letter to his Constituents
1843.
NORTH CAROLINA PORTFOLIO

"The powers granted under the Constitution, being derived from the People of the United States, may be resumed by them, whenever perverted to their injury or oppression."—Madison.

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Evidence of a Whig of 1840.

CIRCULAR OF THE
Hon. Abraham Rencher
TO HIS CONSTITUENTS.

FELLOW-CITIZENS: Before leaving Washington, I avail myself of the occasion to submit to you a brief review of the most prominent measures which have engaged the attention of the 27th Congress. It is a valuable custom in North Carolina, which I have never neglected. Separated from most of you by the recent apportionment of congressional districts, I can now have no other object than simply to render an account of my stewardship to those at whose hands I have received numberless expressions of kindness and confidence. To me this is rendered the more necessary since there have not been wanting selfish political leaders in the district, and partisan presses out of it who have endeavored to create the impression that, since my election I had abandoned my principles, and betrayed your political rights. If this were true, it were a grievous offence, and would deserve your severe censure. But I aver, most solemnly, that I have given no vote, nor expressed any opinion, inconsistent with the republican principles of my whole life, or at war with the promises and pledges which I made when a candidate before you. It is true, the Whig party have thought proper, since they came into power, to adopt a certain system of measures as Whig measures, upon which they hope and expect to elect a particular man to the Presidency in 1844; but most of these measures I have always opposed, and so have you; and as it was no part of my duty to make a President, I have thought it best to pursue a straightforward course, and leave President-making to the people. This is the sole cause of my offence; and for this I have been denounced as guilty of treachery to the party. Before I proceed to examine this grave charge, allow me to say that you, who know me best, well know that I have never been the slave of any party. This excessive blind party spirit I have always deprecated. It is, in my opinion, the cancer of the body politic; and if our glorious institutions are ever destroyed, it will be the bitter fruits of this bloody Moloch of party. I trust I shall never forget that I have a country to serve; which country, next to God, is entitled to my highest obedience; and I can yield to party nothing, which a high sense of duty to that country will not justify. These are principles which I have often proclaimed to you, and you have as often approved and applauded. They are the principles upon which I have endeavored most faithfully to represent you, during the eventful Congress which has just passed away.

But what are the Whig measures and Whig principles which I have felt it my duty to oppose, and for which I have been denounced? I can mention only the principal ones, and leave you to judge whether, in my opposition to them, I have abandoned any of my former principles, or those which were professed by the Whig party in 1840. They are distribution, public debt, a protective tariff, a general bankrupt law, abolition of the veto power, and opposition to the right of the constituent to instruct the representative. I do not say that all who call themselves Whigs are in favor of all these measures, because I know there are some exceptions among the people of the South; but I do assert that they are the principles held by the great body of the Whig party, and if they succeed in electing a Whig President in 1844, will be carried out under his administration. Neither do I say that these are the only measures of Whig policy, because I know a bank of the United States is a favorite measure with them. But I voted for both the bank bills of the extra session, because I was pledged so to do, and because I believed, at that time, we could not have a sound currency without the aid of such an institution. I have since, however, had good cause to believe that, in this opinion, I was wrong. Most of the State banks have since resumed specie payments without the aid of such an institution; while the recent failure of the Bank of the United States of Pennsylvania has exhibited a scene of corruption and mismanagement which has shaken the confidence of many of its former most able advocates. I shall confine myself, therefore, to such measures of Whig policy as I have felt it my duty to oppose; and leave you to judge whether I have done so rightfully, or whether I deserve the censure so liberally heaped upon me by a portion of the Whig party, who, for party purposes, support all these strong Federal measures.

DISTRIBUTION BILL.

The bill to distribute the proceeds arising from the sales of the public land, was one of the first measures of the extra session. That session was called in consequence of the embarrassed condition of the

treasury. With all its means, the Government was not able to meet its engagements, and Congress was called together to devise ways and means for its relief. It seemed, therefore, strange to me, as it must appear to you, that almost the very first measure should have been one of additional embarrassment to the treasury, rather than one of relief—one to withdraw the means of support from the Government, rather than to add to them. It was not to distribute from an overflowing treasury, or to divide a surplus revenue; but it was to distribute from a bankrupt treasury, which of course, had to be made up by still heavier taxes laid upon the people. Shortly after this bill passed the House of Representatives, and before it passed the Senate, in reply to a letter from one of my constituents, I stated very fully the reasons of my opposition to this measure. I beg leave to extract from that letter:

"I voted against the bill to distribute the proceeds of the sales of the public lands, though the bill did not, by any means, provide for an equal or equitable distribution. It gave to nine of the new States ten per cent, in addition to 5 per cent, heretofore allowed them, more than their equal share; while, of course, it left that much less for the old States, who gave a large portion of these lands to the General Government. It gave to the same nine new States half a million of acres of choice lands for internal improvement, while it gave not an acre to the old States; and this, too, although the new States have heretofore received millions of acres of these lands for schools and colleges, roads and canals, while the old States have received little or none. You perceive, therefore, that the distribution was neither equal nor equitable, but was both unequal and unjust."

"You know that I have always been opposed to the pre-emption system, by which the people of the new States are allowed to settle upon the public lands without any authority, and then take these lands at the lowest price, which is a dollar and a quarter an acre; although the same land, if sold at public auction, would often bring ten times that amount. This system has always been deprecated by the people of North Carolina and especially by the Whig party, as repugnant both with fraud and injustice; and yet this bill has established this abominable system. It is as much a pre-emption or a donation bill as it is a distribution bill; and all who voted for distribution equally voted for pre-emption and donation. The bill contained other features equally objectionable. It admitted, in express terms, the right of Congress, hereafter to give away these lands to the new States in which they lie—a right always denied by the good people of North Carolina, and especially by the Whig party in the State. "There are some objections to the bill itself; but the condition of the treasury afforded an insuperable objection to any distribution at this time. It was well understood before my election, that in consequence of the expenditures of the late Administration having been much greater than the current income, and that the annual revenue would not be sufficient for the support of the Government without a large increase of the tariff, or duty upon imports, at least to the extent provided for in the compromise of 1833. I therefore stated to the people in my circular, as well as in all my public addresses, that, while I believed Congress had the power to distribute the proceeds of the sales of the public lands, and ought to do so whenever the condition of the treasury would justify it; yet that I could not consent to distribute any portion of the revenue as long as the Government was in debt, without our being able to know exactly when or how this debt was to be paid. Whether, therefore, I was right or wrong in the vote I gave, no one had a right to suppose I would give any other vote than I did."

"I concur entirely in the views expressed by the President in his message to Congress, in which he recommends 'a distribution of the proceeds of the sales of the public lands among the States, provided such distribution does not force upon Congress the necessity of imposing upon commerce heavier burdens than those contemplated by the compromise act of 1833.' Let us wait and see whether a duty of twenty per cent, upon our imports, as contemplated by the compromise law of 1833, and as carried out by the law we have just passed, imposing a duty not exceeding 20 per cent, upon most of the luxuries of life, will raise revenue sufficient for the support of the Government. With economy, I think it will. If so, I am for distribution; but if not, I am opposed to it. I will never vote to distribute any portion of the public revenue, if thereby I lay the foundation of another heavy protective tariff, by which the commerce and prosperity of the South are to be crippled, if not destroyed, for the benefit of the manufacturers of the North. I believe that many voted for that distribution, as they do for every extravagant appropriation of public money, that they may thereby have a better excuse for violating the compromise law, and imposing heavier duties upon imports than is contemplated by that law. These taxes, though burdens to you, are benefits to them; inasmuch as they increase the price of foreign goods, and of course increase, in the same degree, the price of similar goods manufactured by them or their constituents. Well, therefore, might Mr. Adams exhort his northern friends 'to throw the compromise act to the dogs.'"

The bill was accordingly amended in the Senate by inserting a proviso, that no distribution should take place whenever the duties imposed upon the people should exceed 20 per cent, as provided for in the compromise law. This was some assurance to the people of the South that the compromise law was to be held "sacred and inviolate," as promised by the leaders of the Whig party in 1840. If the compromise was violated, there was no distribution. But it was evident, even at the extra session, that the great body of the Whig party were determined to have a high tariff; and they cared but little for distribution, except as it created an excuse for such a tariff. Accordingly, no efforts were made at retrenchment, so as to bring down the wants of the Government within its means; on the contrary, the appropriations for the year 1841, made by the amount of our indebtedness at least five millions of dollars—and this, too, although we had complained so loudly—and, in my opinion, so justly—of the extravagance of our predecessors. So far from an increase of expenditure, there were many reasons why there should have been a large reduction. The Florida war, so long a sink of public money, was just about being terminated; the exploring expedition was returning home; and most of the costly public buildings at the seat of Government were completed. There was, therefore, every reason for a reduction, rather than an increase of expenditure. With these views, you may well suppose I voted against these extra appropriations, for which I was not a little censured at the time. They were con-

sidered Whig measures; and all who did not toe the mark, were denounced as renegade Whigs.—Resolved, however, to do my duty, hard names had no terrors for me. I saw their object was a high tariff, and I would not contribute to it. At the first regular session, therefore, almost the whole party rallied for a high protective tariff. The compromise bill, which we were promised should be kept "sacred and inviolate," was "thrown to the dogs," retaining only those parts most favorable to Northern interests. Instead of 20 per cent, the duties upon many of the most necessary articles of consumption were run up to more than 100 per cent, which is to be paid in cash; while all the drugs and dye-stuffs used in the manufacture of the North, are allowed to come in free of duty. The bill, no distribution could take place, without repealing the proviso in the distribution bill of the extra session. This was done under party drill; and we had the strange spectacle exhibited in a free country, of imposing heavy and unequal burdens upon the people, that they might make an unequal distribution to that same people; giving the least portion to that section upon whom was imposed the heaviest burden. If ever there was a bill of abominations in this country, this was one; and I rejoice that we had a President sufficiently honest and independent to strangle it by the exercise of his constitutional veto.

PUBLIC DEBT.

Our public debt, within two years, has run up from less than ten millions of dollars, to about thirty millions; while our annual revenue, both from lands and imports, does not equal our annual expenditures. We must, therefore, continue to increase our public debt. If we make distribution, that public debt must continue to increase more rapidly—and that, too, in time of profound peace. Unless, therefore, the people take the alarm, we shall have in this country what the English people are now groaning under—a permanent public debt, so hostile to free institutions. There are other causes of alarm, which threaten still more to overwhelm us in public debt. A large party in both Houses of Congress stood ready, at the last session, to assume the payment of claims for French spoils prior to 1800—amounting to not less than twenty millions of dollars; while a more formidable party is growing up, especially in the indebted States, in favor of the monstrous project of the assumption of State debts by the General Government, to the amount of two hundred millions of dollars. Under all these circumstances, to think of making distribution of any part of our revenue, is the very essence of political folly. Who among you could so manage his own private affairs, and sustain his character for honesty and integrity?—What prudent man would give you credit, if you were found making distribution of your effects among debts, and with an annual expenditure greatly exceeding your annual income? The same rule applies to States that does to individuals; and, accordingly, we found the bond of this Government hawked about in the markets of Europe and this country, without a bidder, until this reckless policy of distribution was abandoned.

THE TARIFF.

But though the clause making distribution was abandoned under the veto of the President, all the other odious features of this tariff bill were revived. We of the South had been induced to believe this exciting question was forever settled by the compromise law of 1833. That law was the result of mutual concessions on the part both of the North and South, for the purpose of securing reciprocal advantages. This compromise provided for a gradual reduction of duties from 1833 to the 30th of June, 1842; slowly at first, but more rapidly as it approached its termination. After June, 1842, all duties were to be laid for revenue purposes only, and were not to exceed 20 per cent, ad valorem, or on the amount of their value. This was a concession to the South. But as a further security to Northern manufacturers, it was agreed, that this duty should be paid in cash, and that dye-stuffs, and other drugs used in manufacturing, should come in free of duty. Thus stood the matter up to the year 1842; the South all the while patiently submitting to this slow reduction of duties, under the assurance that, after June, 1842, no duty was to exceed 20 per cent. During the whole of this period, no considerable party in this country ever intimated a disposition to violate this compromise. The late Administration, under all its financial difficulties, held the compromise sacred; and the whole of the party, with very few exceptions, voted against its recent violation. During the campaign of 1840, both parties contended that the compromise act was to be held "sacred and inviolate." Mr. Clay, its distinguished author, in a speech delivered in Buffalo in 1839, used the following emphatic language:—"If the compromise be inviolably maintained, (as I think it ought to be,) I trust that the rate of duty for which it provides, in conjunction with the stipulation for cash duties, inserted for the benefit of the manufacturing interest, will insure its reasonable and adequate protection."

General Harrison, in his Zanesville letter, holds still stronger language:—"I am (says he) for supporting the compromise act, and will never agree to its being altered or repealed. I will approve no law which goes to ALTER OR REPEAL THE ACT OF 1833."

If that great and good man had lived, I believe he would have kept his faith to the country. But how has it been kept by the Whig party? Like the wolf keeps the lamb—has been devoured. As soon as they came into power, with John Q. Adams, that arch enemy of Southern rights and Southern institutions, as their leader, they determined "to throw it to the dogs;" and you have nothing of the compromise remaining, but the cash duties, and the long list of free articles inserted for the benefit of the manufacturing interest. Instead of the 20 per cent, which was intended for your benefit, you have to pay from 40 to 100 per cent, and even more, upon many of your necessary articles of consumption. Before God, I do not believe there can be found, in the history of party warfare, so flagrant and shameful an instance of political treachery—not only to party, but to the whole people, and especially to the people of the South; and yet your party leaders and party press, instead of denouncing it as such, turn round and approve the act, and invoke your indignation against those who could not be induced thus to join in betraying you.

I am aware that the reason assigned for this violation of the compromise was the wants of the treasury. But these wants were created in part by themselves, and as I believe, to create an excuse for that violation. They made a large increase to the appropriations made by Mr. Van Buren's Administration for the year 1841, and added very largely to the navy—both in its officers and men; as well as the number of ships to be put in commission; and this, too, when that department was under the direction of a gentleman admitted by all to be "every inch a Whig." But the wants of the treasury, though great, and made still greater by themselves, was no sufficient excuse for departing from the compromise; for it was admitted by their most ardent supporters, that the compromise was only for revenue purposes. The compromise was never intended to be a permanent law, but a temporary expedient, to be doubled. Subsequent facts have shown this opinion to have been correct; because the amount of our imports, in consequence of these high duties, has so much declined.

The amount of revenue for the two first quarters of the year 1842, under the compromise, when the duties were lowest, was \$10,739,545; while during the two last quarters, after the passage of the bill of abominations, it was only \$5,770,670—but little more than half. So of the last quarter of the year 1841: under the compromise, the revenue was \$4,936,063; while for the corresponding quarter for the year 1842, under the high tariff, it was only \$2,465,164. So you see an increase of duty does not always increase the amount of revenue; but, on the contrary, when the duty is very high, it diminishes it, and may be put so high as to amount to absolute prohibition, and entirely destroy the revenue; and this constitutes the true distinction between the friends of free trade and those of protection. Both are in favor of some duty on imports; and whether the duty be low or high, it must, to that extent, to afford encouragement to the manufactures of this country. But the friends of free trade contend that the Government ought not to lay any duty but such as shall be laid for revenue only; while the friends of a protective tariff desire to cripple trade by duties so high as shall give them the control of the home market, without regard to the amount of revenue raised. To use their own language, they wish to render the country independent of all foreign nations, by laying such duties as shall exclude foreign goods from competition with similar articles manufactured by themselves. You perceive, therefore, if ever this system should obtain complete success, there must be an end to revenue from imports—at least from the importations of such goods as are manufactured in this country. To supply the place of this revenue, we must resort to direct taxes, which must result from a permanent and oppressive trade, that is most likely to lead to direct taxation.

But high duties, diminished importations, and the loss of revenue, are not the only evils which this system inflicts upon us. There is another law of trade, which is as certain as anything can be. It is, that the amount of your exports must depend upon the amount of your imports. For a series of years they must be equal, or nearly so. You cannot expect to sell to other nations, unless you buy of them. Whatever, therefore, diminishes the amount of our imports, must, to the same extent, diminish the amount of our exports. And we of the South, who produce most of these exports, will find them growing less and less valuable to us, until we shall be compelled to abandon their production, or submit to the slavish condition of allowing the Northern manufacturers to fix their own terms—both for what they sell to us, and what they buy from us. We find such to be the effects of the heavy duties imposed by the new tariff. Our imports and exports have both fallen off; the price of manufactured goods has risen; while the price of cotton, the great staple of the South, and upon which almost every other business depends, will hardly bear its transportation to market. Truly may it be said of this system, that it makes us hewers of wood and drawers of water for the benefit of our northern brethren.

You perceive, therefore, that the increase of the tariff was not for revenue, but protection—protection, not against violence, but against low prices, which the manufacturers wish to increase by an increase of duty; for they know full well that the price of imported goods depends upon the amount of duty imposed upon them. Otherwise, you would not hear their continual clamor for high taxes upon all such imported goods as they manufacture, at the same time that they ask to import free of duty such goods as they use and do not manufacture. Let us examine into the secret cause of this extraordinary zeal for high duties. If the increase of price were confined alone to the foreign article, they would be as much opposed to high duties as we are; but they know that the price of their own manufactures must depend upon the price of the foreign article, which depends upon the amount of duty imposed upon it. When you consume a foreign article with the duty laid upon it, the increased price caused by the increase of duty, is paid for revenue, because the duty has already been paid into the treasury by the importing merchant, and, of course, laid on the goods. But when you consume domestic goods, equal in price to similar goods imported with the duty on, the increased price is paid as a bounty to the manufacturer, and goes into his pocket. This bounty, paid by the people, is what they call protection. The people of this country, therefore, everywhere, upon most of the goods which they consume, pay a large part of the price, either for revenue or for bounty. When duties are low, and your trade is free and flourishes, the proportion of what you pay for revenue increases, and that for protection diminishes; but when the duties are very high, and your importations are small, the amount paid by you, on account of this increased price, is much greater; but most of it is for bounty, and but little for revenue. The late census tables enable us to form some estimate of the relative amount paid for revenue, and that paid for protection. The amount of imported goods upon which protective duties are laid, is put down by a very accurate gentleman at \$45,000,000; and the amount of similar goods, manufactured in this country, and increased in price to the consumer by the duty upon the foreign article, is put down at this time, as one to ten. While \$10,000,000 is paid for bounty or protection. This vast burden does not fall alone upon the people of the South, but falls upon consumption everywhere; and the people of

the North, not under the influence of manufacturing establishments, are rallying with us against this unjust oppression. To us of the South, high duties are peculiarly oppressive; for while they impose heavy burdens upon our consumption, they cripple commerce, and destroy the value of the products of our prosperity mainly depends. You see, too, why the manufacturers are so clamorous for high taxes. To them, taxation is a blessing; for if they pay one dollar upon imports for revenue, they get ten for bounty in return. You see, too, why those who represent that interest always favor extravagant appropriations of public money, oppose retrenchment of expenditures, and go for distribution, or anything else that shall keep up this necessity for high duties. You see, too, why those who represent the farmers and planters, who are the principal consumers in this country, ought to oppose distribution of any portion of our revenue, which is to be made up by an increase of duties; for while you get one dollar from the revenue in this way, you have to pay ten times that amount for revenue and bounty. As soon, therefore, as the manufacturers found they had a majority in the 27th Congress, they began to pave the way for a protective tariff. They contrived to make it a Whig measure, and either deceived or denounced most of the party into its support. Their orators and presses represented it as the great panacea for a suffering country. Even the bank was secondary to it. The National Intelligencer, printed at the seat of Government, and the great organ of the Whig party, thus introduced the tariff bill to the notice of its readers:

"It will to-day" (says the editor) "be laid before the President with whom the solemn responsibility will then rest, either to sign the bill and give relief to a suffering people, or, shutting his eyes and his heart to the public distress, refuse his assent to the bill, and plunge his country into hopeless misery."

Such was the common language of the Whig party in 1842. But suppose they had used such language in the campaign of 1840, and had told you that the great relief they had in store for your sufferings, were high taxes without which you must remain forever in "hopeless misery;" would you have rallied as you did to their standard? Would you not have rejected such proffered relief with scorn, and trampled it under your feet? I think you would. You labored for relief, and they imposed additional burdens. You asked for a fish, and they have given you a serpent.

Another argument resorted to in favor of high taxes, especially in North Carolina, is retaliation. They say, because the British Government imposes high duties upon many articles, some of which we produce, (such as breadstuffs and tobacco,) that we must retaliate. Stripped of all sophistry, the argument is simply this, that because the British Government with an immense public debt, and king and lords to provide for, oppresses her subjects by high taxes, therefore we should oppress our people; and this, too, not for revenue, as in Great Britain, but for bounty or protection to a favored class of people. Our system, therefore, finds no justification even in the British system. The most of the large revenue which she raises, except what is raised from excise and direct taxes, is raised from a few articles only which are not and cannot be produced in Great Britain—such as tobacco, coffee, sugar, tea, wine, spices, and perhaps silks. These duties, therefore, are laid alone for revenue, and are paid for revenue, and are paid for revenue only. Almost the only high protective duty laid by Great Britain, is laid upon breadstuffs, for the protection of the farmer. Upon manufactured goods the duty is very low—scarcely exceeding 15 per cent, and often much less. Thus, you see, the policy of the British Government is the very reverse of what is here contended for. Most of her heavy duties are laid upon the luxuries of life; while we tax luxuries very lightly, if at all. If England lays protective duties, they are mainly for the benefit of the farmer; while we tax the farmer for the benefit of the manufacturer. We impose the highest duties upon the necessities of life; while in England, those duties are very low—the declared policy of her present ministry being to enable her people "to buy cheap." This is my policy, has always been, and always will be; and I can never consent to act with any party who adopt a different policy. I am willing to be taxed to any amount for the support of the Government; but not a cent beyond, or for the avowed benefit of any other section, or any other class of people.

"Millions for defence, but not a cent for tribute."

Such are my views of this protective policy.—With me, it is the great question in politics; for upon it must depend the character of every administration. You cannot expect, from any party who believe high duties a blessing, anything but schemes of extravagant appropriation and wasteful expenditure to keep up the necessity for such duties. They are the natural fruits of such a policy. Even Mr. Clay, in a recent letter to his Whig friends of New York, declared he considered it fortunate that the wants of the treasury made high duties necessary. Under the influence of such a principle, it is vain to expect either economy in our public expenditures, or reform of public abuses.

THE BANKRUPT LAW.

Was another measure which I felt it my duty to oppose. It was, likewise, made a Whig measure. But for that, and its connexion with other Whig measures, it could never have become a law. Bad as the law was, the manner in which it was passed was much worse. It was literally log-rolled into existence. Men decidedly opposed to it, were induced to vote for it to buy support for other measures; and thus an obnoxious law was added upon the country, which never had the hearty approval of a majority of your representatives. A well-regulated bankrupt law, operating only on debts contracted subsequent to the passage of the law, may be very proper; but a bankrupt law, such as the one which was passed, authorizing everybody to repudiate debts previously contracted, was, in my opinion, most unjust and unconstitutional. It was unjust to creditors who had sold property, loaned money, or given credit, before the existence of any such law; and was a violation, in spirit at least, of that clause in the Constitution which declares that "no State shall pass any law impairing the obligation of contracts."

But it is now unnecessary to dwell upon this law.