

THE  
**STATE OF THE KINGDOM**  
WITH RESPECT TO  
**THE PRESENT BILL**  
AGAINST CONVENTICLES.

BY  
JOHN OWEN

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THE PRESENT BILL AGAINST CONVENTICLES.

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THE whole kingdom is at present in peace and quietness, all persons being under the highest satisfaction in his majesty's government, and absolutely acquiescing therein.

In this condition, all individual men are improving their industry, according to their best skill and opportunities, for their own private advantage and service of the public.

Such is the state of things in Europe at present and among ourselves, that the entire industry of all the inhabitants of this nation, with all possible encouragements given thereunto, is scarcely able to maintain themselves in their present respective conditions, and the whole in its due splendour, honour, and strength.

The bill against conventicles, if passed, will introduce a disturbance into this order of things in every county, every city, every borough and town corporate, and almost every village in the nation.

Those on whom this disturbance will fall are, for the most part, merchants, clothiers, operators in our own manufactures, and occupants of land, with the like furtherers and promoters of trade.

The end aimed at is their conformity, or their ruin. For the ministers being for the most part poor, and ruined already, the great penalty directed to be laid on them in the first place must immediately fall upon the people, those also that are able being liable to distress for the penalty of others that are poor, which, if executed, will be the certain ruin of many.

It is manifest that few will conform upon the severity, if

any at all ; nor is it a suitable means for the conviction of any one man in the world.

The people therefore will, some of them, continue to meet, notwithstanding this act ; and some of them at present, it may be, will forbear.

For those who will continue their meeting, as accounting themselves obliged in conscience so to do, they will immediately so dispose of their estates and concerns, that they shall be as much out of the reach of the penalties of the law, as can well and honestly be contrived ; nor can any man blame them for so doing. And what an obstruction this will prove in the circulation of the trade of the nation, is easy to imagine.

Others, who will forbear going at present to meetings, yet will prepare themselves so to dispose of their estates and concerns, as that they and their families may not be ruined here by penalties, or that they may not subsist elsewhere.

In the mean time, all trust will fail between persons of mutual engagements. Those who are not obnoxious to the penalties of this act, will fear that others who are so will be ruined by it ; and so take their concerns out of their hands : those who are so obnoxious will call in theirs out of the hands of others, lest they should be there liable to distress ; and so all mutual trust in the nation will fail.

The minds of innumerable persons now at peace and rest, will be cast into fears, troubles, perplexities, and restless contrivances for their own safety, by hiding, flying, or the like ways of escape ; and thereby an issue will be put to all their industry at present, not useless to the commonwealth.

The residue of the body of the people, not delighted with these severities, will stand and gaze, looking on with great discouragement as to their own endeavours, being many of them entangled with the concernments of those that suffer, and naturally disliking informers upon penal statutes, which sort of men they will not rejoice to see enriched with their peaceable neighbours' goods.

That under this great change in the minds and industry of so considerable a part of the nation, there will hardly, by the remaining discomposed party, be a revenue raised for the private occasions of the subjects, and a surplusage for

the necessity of the government, as things are stated at this day in the world, is evident to all impartial men.

There can be but two things pleaded to give countenance to this high severity, which will certainly be attended with all the consequences mentioned.

The first is, that an evil greater than all those enumerated, will be prevented by it: and of evils, the least is to be chosen.

The other, that a good, which shall outbalance all those evils, will be attained.

The evil to be prevented is sedition, commotions, and tumults, which the meetings now to be prohibited will occasion.

It is acknowledged, that there is more evil in these things than in all those before mentioned. But it is positively denied, that there is the least cause of suspicion of any such evils from the meetings now prohibited, at least as they may be stated under the inspection of the magistrate. For,

Experience of the resolved peaceableness under great opportunities to attempt disturbances during the plague, fire, and war, in those who thus meet, evidence the contrary against all exceptions.

Their declared principles are for all due subjection to his majesty; and they are ready to give that security of their adherence to their principles, which all other subjects do, and which mankind, in such cases, must be contented withal.

It is their interest to be peaceable and quiet, as enjoying, under his majesty's government, the best condition they are capable of in this world, whilst they have liberty for their consciences in the things of God.

They are particularly sensible of the obligation that is put upon them in their liberty, unto subjection and gratitude to his majesty beyond other subjects, which will oblige them to faithfulness and stability in their allegiance.

The fears therefore of the consequence of this evil is plainly pretended, without any ground of reason or cause of suspicion.

The good to be aimed at, which must outbalance all the evils mentioned before, is conformity.

There is already an agreement in doctrine, and the substantial of worship amongst most, and will be so, though a well regulated liberty shall be granted.

A uniformity in all rituals and ceremonies is so far from being a good, that should lie in the balance against all the evils which the pressing of it with the severity intended will certainly produce; as that, it may be, it will not compensate the trouble of any one quiet and peaceable subject in the kingdom.

It is justly feared, that the bill, as proposed, leaves neither the king himself, nor any of his subjects, that just right, liberty, and privilege, which are inseparably inherent in him and his crown, and which belong unto them by the fundamental laws of the land.

It is presumed, what has thus in general been offered, may appear more evident by the following particulars.

1. Such is the state of affairs abroad in the world, and among ourselves, that the encouragement of all sorts of persons unto honest industry in their respective capacities and employs, is absolutely necessary unto the supportment of the honour and government of the kingdom, and the comfortable subsistence of the subjects of it. Without this, in the securest peace, we shall speedily find one of the worst effects of war, in a distressing general poverty.

2. Unto the encouragement of such honest endeavours, mutual trust among all sorts of men, is necessary; which can never be attained nor preserved, but where all peaceable persons have the same protection and assurance of the law. Wherever this trust generally fails, it threatens the dissolution of any society of men.

3. All sorts of dissenters are disposed unto a complete acquiescency in the government, desiring no other encouragement unto their usefulness under it, but only that force be not offered unto their consciences in things appertaining unto the worship of God, which is the common right of nature and grace, as well as the present visible interest of the kingdom.

4. Unless these things, namely, industrious endeavours in the way of trade and usefulness, common mutual trust, with acquiescency in the government be countenanced and preserved, it is impossible that the welfare and prosperity of

the kingdom should be continued, as, by God's blessing upon them, they will be.

5. The present prosecution of them who dissent from the church of England, tends directly unto the subversion of all these things, and hath in a great measure already effected it; nor doth it promote the interest of religion, or conformity unto the church itself. For,

(1.) By the execution of the act against seditious conventicles (whereof in the true sense and construction of the law, not one of those of the dissenters are) many have their goods taken away, multitudes are forced to remove their habitations and to give over their useful callings, to the great obstruction and ruin of common industry in many places.

(2.) By the writs and processes on the statutes for not coming to church (not intended, as is humbly conceived, against Protestants), whereby a devastation is designed of the estates of many peaceable and loyal persons, at the wills of many needy prosecutors and informers, all mutual trust is shaken and impaired. For amongst multitudes of industrious subjects, none know how soon themselves, or those in whom they are concerned, may fall under the ruining execution of those statutes, they being a very great number who are already sued and molested thereby. And some in demanding their just debts have been threatened by their debtors with a prosecution on those statutes, and so forced to desist the recovery of their debts, to avoid greater inconveniency than the loss of them.

(3.) By the act for banishing ministers five miles from corporations (humbly conceived contrary to the birthright privilege of every Englishman unconvicted of any crime) many are driven from their habitations, many imprisoned, to the ruin of themselves and their families, and the great dissatisfaction of all uninterested persons.

(4.) Whereas sundry justices of the peace, men of known integrity, and of especial interest in the places of their residence, are threatened and sued for not complying with the unseasonable desires of every informer, whereby they are discouraged in the discharge of their duty, and weary of their office; it is a matter of great dissatisfaction unto all sober men. For the persons so molested, are known to de-

sign nothing but the prosperity and welfare of the place wherein they live and act in their office.

(5.) Most of those who act visibly in these prosecutions are persons of ill fame and reputation, desperate in their outward fortunes, and profligate in their conversations, whose agency is a scandal unto them by whom they are employed. And both these things last mentioned evidently tend to the dissatisfaction and disturbance of the minds of sober and honest men. For as by this procedure the industry of multitudes is defeated, and mutual trust impaired among all sorts of men; so are the minds of many diverted from a just acquiescency in the government, to hearken after changes and alterations, and made obnoxious unto ill impressions.

(6.) Neither is religion in general promoted by these proceedings, as is manifest in the event; nor can it so be. For as they are contrary to the prime dictates of the Christian religion (as is humbly conceived) so many immoralities are occasioned by them. To omit other instances, the vilest persons being encouraged in the cases mentioned to swear for their own advantage, there have been in a short time more public perjuries before magistrates, than can be proved or suspected to have been in some ages before.

(7.) Nor is conformity, the end pretended to be aimed at, at all advanced by them; as is sufficiently manifest in universal experience. And whereas the only way to promote either religion, or conformity, is by the laborious preaching and exemplary, humble conversation of the clergy, if any should not like this way, but betake themselves to force alone, they would have no reason to expect success.

6. Whereas, therefore, his majesty hath long since declared his royal sense of these things; and both houses of Parliament have intimated their desire and intention to give some ease and relief unto the consciences of sober and peaceable dissenters; and many wise and judicious magistrates have openly declined, what lieth in them, all engagement in these prosecutions; so that the visible prosecutors are generally persons of ill fame and reputation, seeking to repair the ruins of their idleness and licentiousness by the spoils of the honest labours of other men, while the generality of sober and industrious people in the nation, who

understand how much they are concerned in the peaceable endeavours of others, dislike these proceedings. To prevent an offence by petitioning, it is humbly offered unto the parliament, to free the minds of so great numbers of peaceable subjects as are concerned in these things, from fears and disquietments, and the estates of many from ruin, to encourage industry, mutual trust, and universal acquiescency in the government, to vindicate the honour of the Protestant religion, and prepare the way for a future coalescency in God's good time, through love and condescension, by the removal of these occasions of animosities, distrusts, and provocations, that they would by order suspend the farther prosecution of the penal laws against dissenters in religion, until upon mature consideration they shall have settled things in a better way, unto the glory of God, the honour of his majesty, the security of the Protestant religion, and prosperity of the kingdom; which are all earnestly prayed for, by those concerned in this address.