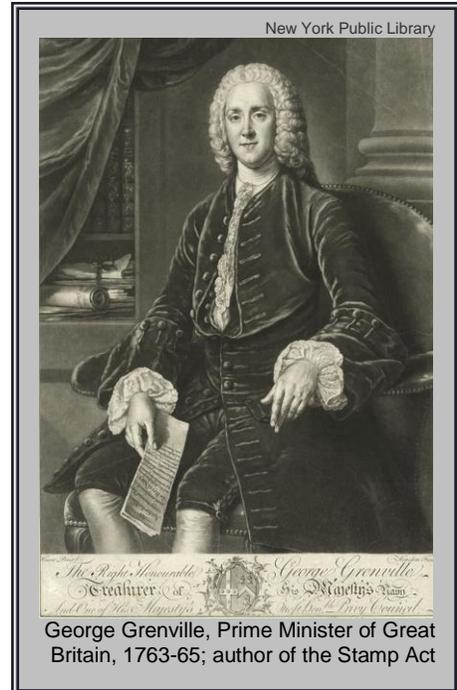


Parliament Debates the Stamp Act, February 1765

In early 1765 Parliament was struggling to meet the cost of defending its empire in North America—vastly expanded after the French and Indian War. The task required a standing army (fulltime soldiers maintained during peacetime) since the new territories lacked enough Englishmen to constitute local defense forces. Regular British troops were needed to keep the peace between the French and Indians and to deal with smuggling, land grabbing, and crime. Prime Minister George Grenville stated the matter in its simplest terms: “The money for these expenses must be raised somewhere.” To the British it was perfectly logical to raise the money in the colonies; they, after all, were the chief beneficiaries of Britain’s military exertions. Parliament settled on a simple way to obtain the needed funds, an easy-to-collect tax on documents, i.e., the paper on which they would be printed.

These selections from the debate on the Stamp Act in the House of Commons illuminate how British politicians viewed the issue of colonial taxation—especially the question of taxation without representation. Written in the clipped, abbreviated style of notes taken in haste, they record remarks made on February 6, 1765, eight days before Grenville formally presented the Stamp Act to the House of Commons for a vote.



__DEBATE, HOUSE OF COMMONS__

*Committee of Ways and Means: Resolutions for colonial stamp duties.*¹

6 FEBRUARY 1765__EXCERPTS

Ordered, That it be an Instruction to the Committee of the whole House, to whom it is referred to consider further of Ways and Means for raising the Supply granted to His Majesty, that they do consider of proper Methods for raising a Revenue in the *British Colonies* and Plantations in *America*, towards further defraying the necessary Charges of defending, protecting, and securing, the same. . . .

George Grenville

Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Leader of the House of Commons

Mr. *Grenville*. Resolutions of last year read. Instruction to the Committee moved and passed to consider of means of raising tax upon North America to pay for the defense and protection of North America.

Proposed taxing America from public motive. Private considerations of his own choice would have prevented him if they had been consulted.

Wishes those who had gone before him had marked out a path to him which he might more easily follow. His conduct would then have been less liable to misconstruction.

The reason of the delaying the proposal to this year was to gain all possible information and to give Americans an opportunity of conveying information to this House, whose ears are always open to receive knowledge and to act to it. The officers of the revenue have done their duty in gaining all possible knowledge of the subject.

Objection, he said last year, that if the right of taxing was disputed he would not delay the question a moment. Wished now to avoid that question if possible, because he thinks no person can doubt it.

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¹ Sources: 1. Ryder Diary, pp. 253-61 2. Harris Diary 3. J. Ingersoll to T. Fitch, Fitch Papers, II, 317-26. [Simmons & Thomas, 9]

The objection of the colonies is from the general right of mankind not to be taxed but by their representatives. This goes to all laws in general. The Parliament of Great Britain virtually represents the whole Kingdom, not actually great trading towns. The merchants of London and the East India Company are not represented. Not a twentieth part of the people are actually represented.

“The objection of the colonies is from the general right of mankind not to be taxed but by their representatives. This goes to all laws in general.”

All colonies are subject to the dominion of the mother country, whether they are a colony of the freest or the most absolute government. As to their charter, the Crown cannot exempt them by charter from paying taxes which are imposed by the whole legislature, but in fact the Crown has not done it. . . .

The propriety and expedience of laying this tax. 1st with respect to the state of this country. 2nd with respect to the state of America.

What exemptions will go too. The western country desires an exemption from cider, the northern from a duty on beer. The mischief from the 4s[hilling]. land tax. The true way to relieve all is to make all contribute their proper share. . . .

The Navy used to cost about £7 or 8 hundred thousand, now it costs about £1,400,000 [£: English pounds]. The money for these expenses must be raised somewhere; however, contributors will be displeased. That this great increase of the Navy is incurred in a great measure for the service of North America. That the military force in North America is said by many military men to be not sufficient. He never heard anybody say there was more than necessary.

Second, whether it is proper with regard to America. It can only be improper from the injustice of the demand, or from the inability of the persons on whom it is imposed.

We have expended so much on the support and defense of North America; we have given them so great degree of security after they were before in continual wars; the French are now removed, but they still have some enemies against whom, however, Great Britain is employing her troops.

The ability of the plantations [colonies]. The state of the several payments for their establishment. The whole of North America consists perhaps of 16 or 1700000 inhabitants, pay only about £64,000 a year for its establishment, except North Carolina and Maryland, which he has not been able to get at.

West Indies establishments amount to about £77,000.

The debts of North America, except Pennsylvania of which he has not an account, amounted to £848,000; it did amount to about £2,000,000. . . .

The particular propriety of this mode of raising the tax. Objection, that this tax will produce disturbance and discontent and prevent improvement among the colonies. He has no motive, he can have no motive, for taxing a colony, but that of doing his duty. But as to this objection, when will the time come when enforcing a tax will not give discontent, if this tax does produce it after what we have done and suffered for America? And therefore if we reject this proposition now, we shall declare that we ought not to tax the colonies. And we need not declare after a year's time that we ought not, for then we cannot.

As to taxing themselves, how can so many colonies fix the proportion which they shall pay themselves? Supposing each county was to do this in England; supposing we were to assess the sum and let them tax themselves. What danger arises from this. While they remain dependent, they must be subject to our legislature. They have increased under former taxes and they will flourish under this. They have in many instances encroached and claimed powers and privileges inconsistent with their situation as colonies. If they are not subject to this burden of tax, they are not entitled to the privilege of Englishmen.

As to the propriety of this particular tax, the stamp tax takes in a great degree its proportion from the riches of the people. As in lawsuits and commercial contracts, it increases in proportion to the riches. No great number of officers, no unconstitutional authority in great Boards.

He has enquired from North America whether they objected to this particular species of tax and has not heard one gentleman propose any other. The tax in a

“If they are not subject to this burden of tax, they are not entitled to the privilege of Englishmen.”

great degree executes itself, as the instruments not stamped are null and void, and no person will trust that, especially as the case may be brought by appeal to this country.

Forgery is the only fright to be apprehended, but severe penalties may prevent it. The punishment is in this country death. . . .

This law is founded on that great maxim that protection is due from the Governor, and support and obedience on the part of the governed.

“This law is founded on the great maxim that protection is due from the Governor, and support and obedience on the part of the governed.”

William Beckford

M. P. [Member of Parliament] representing London; owner of Jamaican sugar plantations

Admits right of taxing the imports and exports of the colonies, and says the colonies all admit this principle. . . .

The North Americans do not think an internal and external duty the same.

As to representation, all England is not represented, but it is a written part of our constitution that it is so. When the Cornish boroughs began to send representatives to Parliament, there were almost the only trading boroughs. They had the Stannaries, which furnished them with a flourishing trade while the rest of the country had scarce any trade.

No precedent found of foreign taxation but the Post Office, and that certainly for the convenience of the colonies themselves. If this principle was established, why not tax Ireland; the produce of this would be indeed considerable. . . .

The peace acquisition. No revenue arises from it, but on the contrary a great amount of expense. The North Americans would be glad to be rid of the troops from the Government and the expense of supporting them.

Col. Isaac Barré

M. P., colonel in British army; had been wounded in Canada during the French and Indian War; supporter of American rights; coined phrase “Sons of Liberty” in the debate

. . . Is afraid that too much will be done on the one side and too much said on the other. Wishes to admire Grenville’s prevoyance [foresight] more and [. . .] less. We are working in the dark, and the less we do the better. Power and right; caution to be exercised lest the

power be abused, the right subverted, and 2 million of unrepresented people mistreated and in their own opinion slaves.

There are gentlemen in this House from the West Indies, but there are very few who know the circumstances of North America. We know not yet the effect of the Act passed last year. The tax intended is odious to all your colonies and they tremble at it. He will not go further upon this ground. He will not raise the feeling of the North American if he will yield to anything for the safety of this country.

He thinks part of the regulation passed last year very wise in preventing them from getting the commodities of foreign countries. We know not however the real effect of this. [*Several illegible words*] Many of the colonies are deeply indebted to this country. . . .

The North Americans will complain that they are suffering by impositions while Canada is emerging from slavery and poverty into liberty and riches. . . .

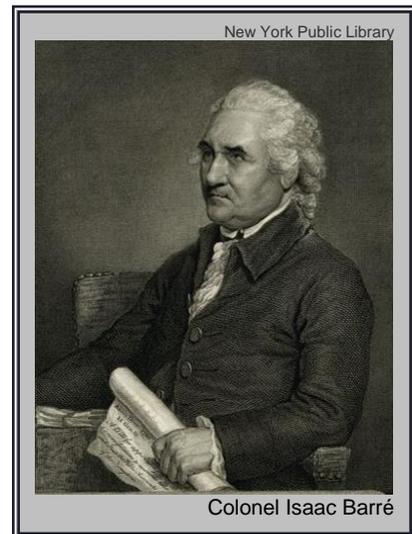
Sir William Meredith

M. P., representing Liverpool

. . . The safety of this country consists in this with respect that we cannot lay a tax upon others without taxing ourselves. This is not the case in America. We shall tax them in order to ease ourselves. We ought

therefore to be extremely delicate in imposing a burden upon others which we not only not share ourselves but which is to take it far from us.

If we tax America we shall supersede the necessity of their assembling. . . .



How will they pay their debts if the first fruits of their commerce are to be applied to the purposes of maintaining our army? . . .

Rose Fuller

M. P., representing Maidstone; owner of Jamaican plantations

Admits the right but doubts the propriety of laying this tax. Is afraid of the discord and confusion which it may produce. The Post Office is a very small instance of a tax forced by this country. This tax is intended to be laid upon very different principles. . . .

Charles Townshend

M. P. representing Harwich; supported the repeal of the Stamp Act a year later

He would have put this debate off if the delay and the use that has been made of that delay if he had heard any good reason for it. But he has heard with great pleasure the right of taxing America asserted and not disputed. If disputed and given up, he must give up the word

“colony” for that implies subordination.

He judged the ability of the colonies from their trade and other circumstances which are the best pulses of their health and vigour, and thinks they can bear it perfectly well. If there is no doubt of the right or the ability to bear it, what other reason can there be for putting it off.

The former delay has produced no reasons but complaints, no proofs but questions of the right to be exempted.

State of the mother country. Planted with so much tenderness, governed with so much affection, and established with so much care and attention. Emancipate in the civil and domestic, not a servile connection. If America looks to Great Britain for protection, she must enable her to protect her. If she expects our fleets, she must assist our revenue.

“If America looks to Great Britain for protection, she must enable her to protect her.”

Col. Isaac Barré

The ability is not denied, but it is not proved. He believes they can pay it. His objection is that it creates disgust, I had almost said hatred.

We did not plant the colonies. Most of them fled from oppression. They met with great difficulty and hardship, but as they fled from tyranny here they could not dread danger there. They flourished not by our care but by our neglect. They have increased while we did not attend to them. They shrink under our hand. . . .

. . . We are the mother country, let us be cautious not to get the name of stepmother. . . .

George Grenville

. . . Then, as Chancellor of Exchequer he opened the business of the day, the American Tax by stamps, which had been in the votes 7th of March last. He told us it was a new subject, of which we must judge.

He spoke to our right of taxing them. No doubt (he said) of our right to bind as to laws and taxes. Objection: they have no representation here. Answer: Parliament represents all, as well non-electors, as electors. If not, not a twentieth part of England represented, not the great body of merchants, not the East India Company, possessed of such territories. . . .

As to expediency, no doubt of that; their aid was wanted, was wanted everywhere. Great and necessary increase of the peace establishment. If said, they do not like it, no more does the west like the cider tax; Scotland, the beer tax; the middle of England, the land-tax. The interest of all was mutual. The plan not unjust, nor above their ability, their present establishments in America and West Indies about £137,000 a year. In North America, a debt of about £800,000, and taxes appropriated to pay it off. Compare this to our debt and expenses here. If the objection be repeated of the uneasiness of the colonies, answer when the time when taxes will give no offence? Besides, were they to tax themselves, they could never agree. The tax could never be settled.

As for danger to their liberties, what is it? They have always been restrained by government here. Privileges and burdens must go together.

Mode of Stamps duty, an easy one to execute. Enforced itself in most instances in bonds, conveyances,

law-proceeding etc.

Concluded with remarking that protection and obedience were reciprocal. Governors owed the first to the governed; the governed owed obedience to their Governors; this, the great bond of all society. Himself on the present subject was ready to give all information. . . .

Col. Isaac Barré [E]xpressed great tenderness for the Americans. Wished we did not go too far. Did not dispute our sovereignty.

William Jackson . . . When we tax Great Britain, we tax our selves. When we tax America, it is *in ease of our selves*. Another reason was transiently given too by I know not whom, which might have been better dwelt on. You had no army in America, when there was an enemy at your backs. Why talk of money to support so large an army now, when your enemy is expelled? . . .

Charles Townshend . . . Mr. *Charles Townshend* spoke in favour of the Bill, took notice of several thing Mr. Barré had said, and concluded with the following or like words: — And now will these Americans, children planted by our care, nourished up by our indulgence until they are grown to a degree of strength & opulence, and protected by our arms, will they grudge to contribute their mite to relieve us from the heavy weight of that burden which we lie under?



Col. Isaac Barré When he had done, Mr. *Barré* rose and having explained something which he had before said and which Mr. Townshend had been remarking upon, he then took up the beforementioned concluding words of Mr. Townshend, and in a most spirited and I thought an almost inimitable manner, said —

“They planted by your care? No! your oppressions planted them in America. They fled from your tyranny to a then uncultivated and inhospitable country — where they exposed themselves to almost all the hardships to which human nature is liable, and among others to the cruelties of a savage foe, the most subtle and I take upon me to say the most formidable of any people upon the face of God’s Earth. And yet, actuated by the principles of true English liberty, they met all these hardships with pleasure, compared with those they suffered in their own country, from the hands of those who should have been their friends.

“They nourished up by *your* indulgence? They grew by your neglect of them: as soon as you began to care about them, that care was exercised in sending persons to rule over them, in one department and another, who were perhaps the deputies of deputies to some member of this House — sent to spy out their liberty, to misrepresent their actions and to prey upon them; men whose behavior on many occasions has caused the blood of those Sons of Liberty to recoil within them; men promoted to the highest seats of justice, some, who to my knowledge were glad by going to a foreign country to escape being brought to the bar of a court of justice in their own.

“They protected by *your* arms? They have nobly taken up arms in your defense, have exerted a valour amidst their constant and laborious industry for the defense of a country, whose frontier, while drenched in blood, its interior parts have yielded all its little savings to your emolument. And believe me, remember I this day told you so, that same spirit of freedom which actuated that people at first, will accompany them still. But prudence forbids me to explain myself further. God knows I do not at this time speak from motives of party heat, what I deliver are the genuine sentiments of my heart, however superior to me in

general knowledge and experience the reputable body of this House may be, yet I claim to know more of America than most of you, having seen and been conversant in that country. The people I believe are as truly loyal as any subjects the King has, but a people jealous of their liberties and who will vindicate them, if ever they should be violated, but the subject is too delicate and I will say no more.”

These sentiments were thrown out so entirely without premeditation, so forceably and so firmly, and the breaking off so beautifully abrupt, that the whole House sat awhile as amazed, intently looking and without answering a word.

I own I felt emotions that I never felt before and went the next morning and thanked Colonel Barré in behalf of my country for his noble and spirited speech.

However, Sir after all that was said, upon a division of the House upon the question, there was about 250 to about 50 in favor of the Bill.

***“They planted by
your care? No! . . .
They nourished up by
your indulgence? . . .
They protected by
your arms? . . . And
believe me, remember
I this day told you so,
that same spirit of
freedom which
actuated that people
at first, will
accompany them still.*”**

[The Stamp Act was passed March 22, 1765. Nearly a year later, on March 18, 1766, Parliament repealed the Act.]

Portraits courtesy of the New York Public Library.

- George Grenville, engraving by Richard Houston, mezzotint, ca. 1750-1775, after portrait by William Hoare. Digital ID 422888.
- Isaac Barré, engraving by John Hall, after portrait by Gilbert Stuart, 1787. Digital ID 465965.
- Charles Townshend, engraving by John Dixon, mezzotint, 1770, after portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Digital ID 465971.