INTERESTING DEBATE.

IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT.

HOUSE OF COMMONS, MARCH 11.

The order of the day was moved for going into a committee to conſider further of the ſupply to be granted to his majeſty.

The houſe accordingly reſolved itſelf into a committee, and Mr. Serjeant moved that ten thouſand ſeamen be added to the number now exiſting.

After the queſtion was put from the chair,

Mr. Francis roſe to offer a few obſervations on the motion, and it is with regret we mention that the commencement of his ſpeech was delivered in a tone of voice too low to be diſtinctly heard in the gallery. The vote which the committee were now called upon to accede to was one which involved conſiderations of the moſt important nature, and before any member could, conſiſtently with his duty, agree to it, ſome general explanation was due on the part of his majeſty's miniſters. It was of importance to the committee to have ſome information communicated reſpecting the ſituation in which the country was placed, the reaſons which rendered ſo extraordinary preparations neceſſary, the character of thoſe with whom the application of thoſe preparations would be veſted, the views they entertained in calling on the houſe to make the preparations, and the degree of confidence to which, by their paſt conduct, they were entitled. He wiſhed ſincerely that the addreſs on a former evening had paſſed without any obſervation. The diſcuſſion which had taken place had put the houſe in poſſeſſion of no new information, and at its cloſe members ſeparated as completely ignorant of the circumſtances on which the addreſs was founded, as before the motion was brought forward. While he called for explanation, he diſclaimed all oppoſition, or hoſtility to his majeſty's miniſters, and indeed he was the more entitled to demand this explanation, as he had hitherto given them his ſupport, and had repoſed confidence in their conduct. He had therefore at this moment a peculiar right to know whether circumſtances exiſted to juſtify the continuance of this confidence. He had a right to be informed whether it was to the fault or the misfortune of miniſters that the preſent ſituation of the country was to be attributed. When the preliminaries of peace were firſt ſigned, and before the terms on which it had been concluded were known, he had been thankful for the termination of a diſaſtrous war. With this ſentiment he felt obliged to miniſters for the peace which they had concluded, viewing it merely as the deliverance from a war without object or end. When the terms of the peace were known they had been ſtrenuouſly objected to by gentlemen, of whoſe talents it was impoſſible to ſpeak without the greateſt reſpect. He did not mean to ſay that the objections, ſeparately conſidered, did not poſſeſs great weight; but, viewing the conditions of the peace, and connecting them with the conſideration of the continuance of war, the ſacrifices which had been made did not appear to him greater than the object deſerved. With ſuch views, therefore, he was ſtill willing to give miniſters credit for the concluſion of peace. That the executive power had the full right of determining in the firſt inſtance, on peace and war, was a doctrine which he by no means wiſhed to controvert. This, however, did not by any means interfere with the right of the houſe to enquire how far the ſervants of the crown had exerciſed their power in a treacherous manner, or preclude them from preſenting an addreſs to his majeſty for their removal, if they ſhould be judged incapable of managing the affairs of the nation under perilous circumſtances, connected with the maintenance of peace, or the renewal of war. On theſe principles, he therefore ventured to aſk whether, when peace was concluded on terms involving conſiderable ſacrifices, when theſe ſacrifices, great as they were conſidered, as the price of an object of anxious deſire, and there was now reaſon to apprehend a renewal of hoſtilities, the houſe had not a fair right to be informed what, after all theſe ſacrifices, was the return which was to be expected; what, for all theſe ſacrifices, was the return which had been obtained? It was not peace, but the proſpect of war, after every conceſſion had been made as the price of tranquility and repoſe.—Were the houſe now to be told that they ſhould obtain no explanation? Was the country to be brought into the perilous ſituation in which it was now placed, and was no account to be given of the cauſes by which the ſituation had been produced? Till the houſe and the country were informed what the circumſtances were which had led to this ſituation, he could not, conſiſtently with his duty as a repreſentative of the people, juſtify the preſent motion. As far as the defence of the country was concerned, there was no need of a recommendation from the throne to induce the houſe to do what loyalty, unanimity, and harmony would have ſuggeſted. This was an object which, in the view of a threat of invaſion from any quarter, the houſe would ever have in view, but they would more particularly conſider it if that threat came from France. At a moment when that which was deareſt was at ſtake, there was no room for difference of opinion, becauſe every man in defending the country only conſulted the means of his own defence. But had not the houſe and the country a right to have it made out that the conduct hitherto purſued by his majeſty's miniſters was not unwiſe and impolitic; that improper conceſſions had not been made, that the country was not unneceſſarily again to be plunged in war? Till this explanation was given, he could not, conſiſtently with his public duty, continue the ſame confidence which he had formerly repoſed. He did therefore hope that ſome explanation would be given by miniſters how far they meant to go with the preparations, the neceſſity of which they had ſtated. By agreeing to this vote without explanation would in fact ſay that the ſame miniſters who had by the greateſt ſacrifices concluded peace, were to be allowed to bring the country into a war, without affording the ſmalleſt information as to the ground of the renewal of hoſtilities. He threw out theſe ſuggeſtions, not ſo much with the view of entering into any detailed diſcuſſion, as of engaging gentlemen of greater abilities to take up the ſubject. Miniſters owed it to their own characters, to the houſe, and country, to ſhew that we were not bro't into our preſent perilous ſituation by any fault on their part. Perhaps to their conduct the extraordinary preparations now called for were owing, and it was ſurely not fit that thoſe who had brought the country into a ſituation where war was the only alternative, ſhould pledge the houſe to the ſupport of that war, without affording any information reſpecting the circumſtances on which it was to be founded.—This, he contended, was the clear law of parliament, the preſent was not a moment raſhly to plunge the country into war. It had already been ſeen what effect his majeſty's meſſage had produced on public credit, and how much the proſpect of a war, no one object of which was explained, would diſhearten the people. At a time like the preſent, when every exertion might be neceſſary for the ſupport of our independence, it was of high importance that the people ſhould repoſe the moſt ample confidence in his majeſty's confidential ſervants. The leaſt diſtruſt of their capacity could tend only to diſhearten the people, and to fill them with aſtoniſhment and terror. At a moment like this, when we might be called upon to ſtruggle even for our exiſtence as a nation, it was a lamentable conſideration that the whole ability of the country was excluded from the government. At the moſt perilous criſis in which the country was ever placed, we were deprived of the opinion, the advice, the talents of all thoſe great men, whoſe cordial co-operation was ſo eſſential to the ſalvation of the country. This language might give offence to many members, but this was not a moment for an independent repreſentative of the people to conceal his ſentiments. It was neceſſary to ſpeak out under the exiſting circumſtances. If the ſhip ſunk, then all would go down with the unſkilful pilot. He wiſhed to preſs theſe conſiderations on the attention of the houſe. They were conſiderations which he had not offered to the attention of the houſe without due reflection. He had viewed the ſubject with the greateſt poſſible ſeriouſneſs, and he had ſuggeſted what his anxiety for the ſafety and welfare of the country ſuggeſted.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, in reply, ſpoke to the following purport:—I think it my duty, ſir, on the preſent occaſion, to follow the ſame courſe which I thought it expedient to purſue when the motion for the addreſs to his majeſty was under conſideration. I then ſtated that under the preſent circumſtances any explanation was what I conceived the houſe had no reaſon to expect; and to this opinion I ſtill adhere. At preſent I riſe ſolely with the view of animadverting very ſhortly on the obſervations which the honorable gentleman has made with a view of ſhewing the neceſſity of explanation. I confeſs the arguments which the honorable gentleman uſed in favor of the propriety of explanation, appeared to me, and I believe that they appeared in the ſame light to the houſe, totally inconſiſtent with the wiſh which he profeſſed when he ſet out, that the addreſs had been carried without any comment at all. I leave it to him to reconcile this opinion with the ſentiments which he has on the preſent occaſion expreſſed. The honorable gentleman profeſſes a deſire that nothing which fell from him might be conſidered as deſigned to diſturb the unanimity which prevailed when this ſubject was formerly brought before the houſe. Now, ſir, I aſk, if prudential reaſons exiſted which rendered any explanation inexpedient on a former evening, whether, acting on the ſame principle, his majeſty's miniſters ought now to give that explanation? If in the one caſe it was politic and expedient that concealment ſhould be obſerved, it is impoſſible for any gentleman to ſhew that the ſame cauſes did not operate with equal force. The honorable gentleman, ſir, has ſaid, that at a criſis when we may be called upon to contend for our very exiſtence as a nation, it is a matter of deep regret that the whole ability of the country is excluded from his majeſty's government. I will readily allow, for myſelf, and I believe I may take upon me to make the ſame avowal for my colleagues in office, that we feel in their utmoſt extent the difficult and arduous duties which we are called upon to perform, and are ſenſible of the reſponſibility we owe to the country for their due performance. This, ſir, may be a very fair ſubject of obſervation to the honorable gentleman; but I may be allowed to aſk, on what principle is it that this gentleman, who tells the houſe diſtinctly, that a miniſtry enjoyed his confidence, from which the whole ability of the country is excluded, ſhould now bring forward againſt them the charge of weakneſs and incapacity? This is a ſort of conduct which I leave the honorable gentleman ſatisfactorily to explain to the houſe. I leave it to him to explain the reaſons for withdrawing the confidence which he formerly repoſed.—On this part of the honorable gentleman's ſpeech, I ſhall not at preſent further enlarge, but proceed to make a few remarks on ſome other obſervations which he adduced. The honorable member laid down the principles by which the declaration of peace or war is regulated with accuracy and preciſion. By the conſtitution of this country, this declaration, is wiſely made to reſt with the chief magiſtrate. If, however, a peace inconſiſtent with national honor and ſafety is concluded, I admit moſt unequivocally with the honorable gentleman, that his majeſty's confidential ſervants are deeply reſponſible for the advice which they have given to their ſovereign. The honorable gentleman has applied the general doctrine to the preſent ſituation of the country, and he has argued, that if by the miſconduct of miniſters the country has been brought into its preſent perilous ſituation, they are deeply and ſeriouſly reſponſible for this ſituation. To this ſentiment I am bound explicitly to aſſert, and I have no difficulty in ſaying, that if it can be ſhewn that his majeſty's miniſters have loſt ſight of the motives which induced them to recommend to his majeſty the concluſion of the treaty of peace which the honorable gentleman himſelf, though in qualified terms, has applauded; if it can be proved that any of the principles which they have hitherto declared to be the guides of their conduct, have been departed from, then I will allow to the honorable gentleman that they have been guilty of a very ſerious violation of their duty to the houſe and to the country. But, ſir, I aver that that ſtep has not been taken by me or by my colleagues in office; that no advice has been given reſpecting the diſcuſſions now depending between the two governments which did not originate from the moſt ardent deſire of preſerving the peace, and which was founded in the true ſpirit of peace. It is, ſir, with the ſame views that miniſters thought it their duty to recommend to his majeſty to ſend to parliament the meſſage on which the preſent motion is founded. It was ſolely with the view of giving the greater probability to the continuance of peace that additional preparations have been recommended. In theſe preparations miniſters looked forward to the moſt likely means of bringing the points in diſpute to an amicable adjuſtment. The honorable gentleman, however, inſiſts on the right of the houſe to explanation. I do not mean, ſir, at all to diſpute the ultimate right of the houſe to a full and fair explanation on this ſubject. This right I have already over and over again fully admitted. I do contend, however, that the houſe had not a conſtitutional right to demand explanation at a moment when explanation would eſſentially injure the advantages which government might derive from exiſting diſcuſſions. It is clear that if miniſters were now to yield to this call for explanation, they might loſe moſt important advantages reſulting from concealment, and at the ſame time give no ſatisfaction. The points on which different members require explanation are various and diſcordant. One member ſays, let us not hazard a war, and therefore let miniſters ſhew us that their ſyſtem is conciliatory. Another party are afraid of too much conceſſion, and nothing will ſatisfy them but a full explanation, to prove that the national honor has not been compromiſed. What advantage, then, is to be derived from explanation, amid ſuch contrariety of opinion, while, on the other hand, the inconveniences of explanation under the preſent circumſtances are obvious? It muſt be clear that when negociations are pending which have given riſe to conſiderable diſputes, if they are brought to an amicable adjuſtment, this can only be accompliſhed by conceſſions on the one ſide or the other. I aſk then, ſir, would it be prudent that the nature of theſe conceſſions ſhould, in the preſent ſtate of the buſineſs, be explained? I believe that a great majority of the houſe think with me, that ſuch an explanation would be highly inexpedient. From what I now ſay, I beg, however, that no inference may be drawn to countenance the idea that miniſters have conſented, or will conſent, to any improper conceſſions. My obſervations refer ſolely to the prudential conſiderations which would, in the preſent circumſtances, render any explanation highly impolitic and diſadvantageous. As to the motion now before the committee, the honorable gentleman does not object to it. He gives it his cordial acquieſcence. He even goes ſo far as to ſay, that if the number of ſeamen propoſed to be voted had been greater, he ſhould have given the motion his ſupport. His only objection is founded on the want of explanation, which, I think, has been ſatisfactorily ſhewn to be inexpedient at the preſent moment. I repeat what I have already more than once diſtinctly ſtated, that I hold myſelf deeply reſponſible for the courſe which his majeſty's confidential ſervants have thought it proper to adopt, but never ſhall I deviate from the principles which I have laid down on this ſubject. I truſt it will ultimately be found that in the hands of miniſters the ſecurity of the country will not be endanged, its rights curtailed, or its honor ſullied. I truſt that it will be found that no conceſſions have been made, which they will not be able fully to juſtify by the combined deſire of preſerving peace and ſupporting the honor and the independence of the country. I know, ſir, that to ſome gentlemen, this language may excite diſguſt. But if the period ſhall ever come, which God grant it never may, as it would involve the renewal of hoſtilities; if ever that time comes, I hope the conduct of miniſters will ſtand fully juſtified. Whatever may be the reſult of this; whether gentlemen ſhall or ſhall not be ſatisfied with ſuch explanation as may be then given, I am ready to hear every objection rather than violate that duty which preſcribes to me the impropriety of affording any explanation of matters now in diſpute betwixt the two governments.

Mr. Fox. I cannot help feeling ſome degree of ſurpriſe at the language which my honorable friend who began the diſcuſſion, and the right honorable gentleman over the way, have uſed reſpecting the converſation which took place on the motion for the addreſs, on which the preſent propoſition is founded. I myſelf certainly began that diſcuſſion, but I do not feel that I was guilty of bringing from any one gentleman who ſpoke, a ſingle ſentiment or expreſſion which could produce a feeling of rancor or animoſity in France, in this country, or any other part of Europe. My honorable friend is unwilling to negative the preſent motion, though he is deſirous of an explanation of the grounds on which it is propoſed, and the right honorable gentleman is ſurpriſed that this explanation is demanded, when my honorable friend expreſſes his readineſs to vote for even a much larger number of ſeamen, if ſuch a number were neceſſary to the public ſervice. I am, ſir, as ready as any member to vote for the propoſed addition of ſeamen, on the principles that they are neceſſary for the public ſervice; but I have at preſent no better ground for my vote than if twenty-five thouſand, a hundred thouſand, or any number of additional ſeamen had been propoſed. My objection reſts on this plain, conſtitutional ground, that as repreſentatives of the people in the proper diſcharge of our duty, we have a right to have the cauſes of theſe increaſed preparations explained, and not be called upon to vote on the unlimited confidence which we chuſe to repoſe for a time in miniſters. I have always underſtood that the prerogative of the crown to conclude a peace was clear and undiſputed, and I can have no difficulty in agreeing with the ſentiments which my honorable friend entertains on this point. I certainly do agree with him, that thoſe who have counſelled his majeſty to conclude any peace, are reſponſible for the merit of the terms of that peace, and are liable to cenſure if they appear inconſiſtent with the national honor and ſafety. I cannot, however, allow, that after the peace has been concluded and after its terms have been canvaſſed and approved, that if circumſtances occur which render the continuance of peace impoſſible, miniſters are to be neceſſarily accuſed of having, by their conduct, produced theſe circumſtances. With reſpect to his majeſty's right of declaring war, there was as little doubt in theory, but in practice a very important diſtinction exiſted. In this declaration might be involved every principle of a free conſtitution, every thing connected with the propeety, nay, the very exiſtence of the ſubject. The ſovereign might be ill-adviſed, and experience had fully proved that this is not merely a poſſible caſe. The country might be plunged into a war, of which it was impoſſible to ſee either the equity or neceſſity. It might be continued againſt the will of the parliament or the people, and the whole, or part of every man's property might be wreſted from him, if in practice this prerogative of the crown were carried to all the extent which theory ſuppoſed. But, ſir, ſuch a conſtruction of the prerogative ſtrikes every one in a moment as monſtrous, and while in theory we admit the power of the ſovereign to declare war, in practice and in ſubſtance we poſſeſs the privilege by which alone that declaration can be carried into effect. This privilege is founded in the means we poſſeſs of giving or withholding the neceſſary ſupplies. This, ſir, is an operation to the prevention of war to a conſiderable degree, though it is only the privilege of the purſe which we enjoy.—This houſe muſt therefore be neceſſarily parties to every war. How, ſir, is this to be done? Why, ſir, the mode of our becoming parties is ample. His majeſty in all caſes ſtates to us the grounds on which he has thought a declaration of war neceſſary, and he calls upon us to grant the ſupplies neceſſary for the proſecution. We all know that inſtances are not wanting in which the ſovereign has been compelled to relinquiſh a war, becauſe parliament, convinced of its injuſtice and ruinous effects, no longer afforded the ſupplies. I will not here determine how far the American war was put an end to by the voice of parliament: but there is one ſtriking inſtance in which a war was put an end to by the exerciſe of this conſtitutional power, and that was the inſtance in which the parliament of Charles the IId. compelled that prince to relinquiſh the Dutch war. Now, ſir, how does the caſe ſtand at preſent? And here I will reſt my argument. We know that in practice the armaments precede any official communication from the throne, or any vote of ſupply; and truſt that, if danger really exiſts, armaments are now going on with a rapidity correſpondent to the emergency on which they are founded. The certain effect of the vote is only to make us direct parties to any war to which theſe armaments may be applied. What I object to, then, is ſimply, that I have heard no grounds ſtated to juſtify any extraordinary preparation; and, therefore, I muſt, on conſtitutional principles, enter my proteſt againſt the mode of proceeding which has been adopted. The caſe of the Ruſſian armament is one in which many perſons were deſirous to purſue a courſe ſimilar to that now propoſed to be adopted; but I do not think that when the conſequences of that armament are conſidered, that the proceedings then adopted will be very likely to encourage imitation. I hope, ſir, I may be allowed to reaſon hypothetically reſpecting the independence of parliament in granting ſupplies for carrying on any war. I truſt that we are not neceſſarily to be conſtantly guided by a ſpirit of humble docility, though our independence may appear more clearly in theory, than in any caſes of modern or recent experience. In whatever we chuſe to exerciſe our conſtitutional right, the probability of its exerciſe will not be diſputed. Poſſibly we might think that negociation was preferable at a moment when miniſters had plunged the country in war; or, on the other hand, we might ſuppoſe, that meaſures of a more vigorous deſcription would have done much more for the national honor than any negociation; and how is our opinion to be expreſſed, except in withholding the ſupplies, before we bind ourſelves to become parties to a war? I therefore, ſir, for one, contend againſt the houſe of commons being a mere echo, a mere docile receiver of whatever communication miniſters may think proper to make under the form of a meſſage from the throne. I do not wiſh to flatter miniſters when I ſay, that I believe that the preparations which have been recommended are founded on a firm and honeſt conviction of their expediency.—I will not ſuppoſe that they would willingly, and without reference to any object of advantage, take ſuch ſteps if they did not imagine that they were eſſential to the intereſts of the country. Their intereſt, as well as their character, equally forbid me to ſuppoſe, that in this inſtance they are deceiving the houſe or the public. This I have no difficulty in ſtating generally, though I muſt add, that inſtances of the guilt, to which I have now alluded, are not entirely unknown. But let gentlemen recollect that with the beſt intentions in the world, miniſters are liable to error, and that what they conceive to be wiſe and politic, might, if explained, appear unwiſe and inexpedient. This I muſt only ſay, that we are totally without all means of forming a judgment. In the meſſage of his majeſty, or in the ſpeech of the right honorable gentleman, there is not a ſingle word ſtated by which I can venture to form any opinion of the points in diſpute. A good deal has been ſaid, ſir, with a view of ſhewing, that if a rupture ſhould take place, it would be only the natural reſult of the treaty of Amiens. Now, ſir, I am one of thoſe who hold a very different opinion, and without heſitation ſay, that if war does not take place there is no neceſſity for ſuppoſing that it has the ſlighteſt connection with the treaty, or that it was a treaty not fit to be concluded. I thought, and I have ſeen no reaſon to alter my opinion, that the treaty of Amiens was an eligible treaty; not eligible compared with other treaties, that under other circumſtances might have been formed, but eligible as freeing the country from a moſt deſtructive war. Are we to be told, ſir, that miniſters dare to make no peace, becauſe the unreaſonable ambition of France may now drive us to the renewal of hoſtilities? Are we to be told that we were to wage warfare till we had obtained a ſatisfactory aſſurance on the part of the enemy, of a ſincere deſire to cultivate all the bleſſings of tranquility in the true ſpirit of peace? No reaſonable man will, I believe hold ſo extraordinary an opinion, as that which I have now ſtated. It may be further urged againſt miniſters, that ſince the concluſion of peace, they have ſhewn too much of the ſpirit of conceſſion. How far this charge is true, I have no means of determining, though there appears no reaſon to conclude that their diſpoſition to conciliation, has gone beyond a commendable deſire to preſerve the peace. If they have been guilty of ſuch forbearance or conceſſion, as has in the ſmalleſt degree compromiſed the honor or the ſafety of the country, unqueſtionably their conduct has been highly criminal, but this is no conſequence of their having concluded the treaty of Amiens. But ſir, perhaps, we are to be told, that it was impolitic to make peace till we had a vigorous adminiſtration to ſupport it. I certainly do not think that want of vigor in an adminiſtration, is a ſufficient reaſon for not entering into a war, if a legitimate cauſe of war exiſts. As an objection to the concluſion of peace, it is one of the moſt ridiculous and inconcluſive that ever was brought forward. If miniſters have conceded too much, or done too little for the ſupport of the honor of the country, they have incurred a very grave reſponſibility, but let not this be laid to the charge of the treaty of Amiens. If I am fond of that, it is becauſe it was the means of ridding us of incumbrances of the moſt oppreſſive kind. Not that it freed us from connection with allies, for allies we had none at the time it was concluded, but that it delivered us from the deteſtable and abominable principles on which the late war was conducted. I do ſincerely hope, ſir, that we ſhall hear nothing more of wars undertaken for religion and ſocial order. I ſpeak not diſreſpectfully of religion or of the bleſſings of ſocial order, but I ſpeak of that deteſtable hypocriſy which held forth theſe as the oſtenſible objects of conteſt, while we were all along fighting for ends of a nature totally different & oppoſite. I believe that ſuch hypocriſy is for ever deſtroyed; & I truſt that as long as a ſentiment of juſtice, as long as a deteſtation of ſuch baſe and infamous deception ſhall be reprobated among men, ſuch attempts to impoſe on a generous people muſt be held in eternal execration. If unfortunately, ſir, we are to be doomed to a renewal of hoſtilities, I hope that the object of the war will be clearly and diſtinctly underſtood. What are the ſubjects which may eventually lead to ſuch an unfortunate reſult, I profeſs to be totally ignorant. Whether they refer to the poſſeſſion of Malta, the evacuation of Alexandria, or whatever other point of diſcuſſion they involve, I have no means of forming an opinion. I ſhall juſt ſay generally, that if our national rights are involved, if attempts have been made to lower that rank which we have been accuſtomed to hold among the ſtates of Europe, and all attempts at amicable adjuſtment have failed, then I have no difficulty in ſaying, that a war undertaken under ſuch circumſtances would be juſt.—