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# Land & Liberty

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## EDITORIAL

### Where Men Learn to Restrict Trade

**E**IGHT alert young men in officers' uniform sit at a table. At the end, flanked by blackboards, stands their instructor, a large scale map of Europe behind him. All unwittingly, these public-spirited, adventurous students are being trained to serve privileged sectional interests and to impair the very fabric of civilisation and peace between nations. They are embryo Preventive Men attending the Waterguard Training School maintained by Her Majesty's Commissioners of Customs and Excise. The school was the subject for an article by Ken Digby in the May 18 issue of *Picture Post* and among the supporting illustrations was the photograph we have described. Its caption summed up the whole matter in a nutshell: "Smuggling is the blacksheep twin of the Customs—they were born at the same time."

Mr. Digby started off decidedly on the wrong foot: "For every man, woman and child in the United Kingdom, Her Majesty's Customs and Excise collect in revenue about £40 a year—a total of more than £2,000 million." The free trader would stress that this immense sum is *added* to the cost of production and consumption, and is collected, very equally, *from* every person who buys goods of any kind.

That false emphasis apart, the article is strictly objective. Its facts remind us forcibly of the appalling waste and other harmful by-products of a wrongful taxation system. Consider first the Customs officer. Only educated men of proven integrity are selected. Their training is "designed to make good men better and better men as near perfect in their reactions and timing as human agency can do it." They are men who could go far, and serve the community well, in productive enterprise. Yet in their chosen career they are not merely non-productive; they are *anti-productive*. For production is not completed until goods reach their final destination—the consumer—and it is the task of the Customs officer as the agent of a protectionist government to discourage the importation of cheap goods

so that consumers will buy dearer home-produced goods. He is the means by which a Government obedient to a false commercial philosophy takes from the people some part of what rightfully is wholly theirs—the value of their exertion—and unavoidably he adds to the final cost of even non-dutiable commodities by delaying cargo at the ports.

In a world riddled with poverty and hunger and torn by conflict, to impede production and to make goods needlessly dear is a crime against all humanity. To deny the community the productive power of the 15,000 people misemployed in this way by the Customs and Excise Department so that they are a drain on society is foolish enough in all conscience. But it is nothing short of sheer madness to maintain laws which provide temptingly lucrative opportunities for the criminal element in modern society. An Instructor at the training school is quoted by Mr. Digby as having told his class, "the smuggler is not a glamorous or heroic figure to us; the professional is a criminal just as much as the burglar who enters a house or the counterfeiter making phoney pound notes." What tragic irony that because trustworthy, enterprising young men (who have to face needless danger and occasional violence) are lined up on the side of privilege and monopoly, unscrupulous criminals can exercise their cunning to get wanted goods to the consumer; anti-social men performing a social service! Could there be a more severe indictment of protectionism?

Various examples of the ruses adopted by smugglers are listed in the *Picture Post* article. They use suitcases with false bottoms, hollowed out shoe heels, and dummy canes. Three or four gallons of cognac can be concealed in specially devised tanks which wrap around the body. On board a ship a 10 lb. screw of tobacco can be concealed in a coil of rope. £10,000 worth of watches can be—and have been—brought ashore hidden in a biscuit tin. In these and other ways the smuggling fraternity dissipate

mental power and audacious courage in an attempt to outwit their well-matched opponents, the Preventive Men. In this constant running battle victory goes sometimes to one side and sometimes to the other but always the community at large is the loser. The coast, rivers, harbours, creeks and sea approaches to the land of the free—Britain—is patrolled unceasingly by Customs revenue vessels ever on the look-out for contraband.

If the nation had sustained some awful catastrophe in days gone by as a result of free imports this practice would be more understandable. But the very reverse is the case: Britain developed her strength and prosperity during the free trade era. Of course there was the most shameful maldistribution of wealth during that period (as there has been since the barriers were erected against imports) but this was not due to Britain's commercial policy. The real reason lay, as it lies today, in the land monopoly as this journal has pointed out consistently under both trading regimes.

What about "dope smugglers"? Here, surely, is a case for searching ships, planes and persons? If trade were free would not Britain seethe with drug addicts? These questions are bound to occur to the new reader. Emphatically the answer is "No!" As the already quoted caption makes clear: "smuggling is the black-sheep twin of the Customs—they were born at the same time." Governmental restrictions alone are responsible for the unnaturally high profits which can be made from trafficking in drugs. However efficient the Customs service may be, at least some drugs are brought into the country illicitly. The recipients are open to vicious exploitation and blackmail, the helpless tools of those who supply them. They would be liberated if trade in drugs were freed, and the smugglers would go out of business overnight as did the black market operators when war-time rationing ended. Restrictions actually increase drug addiction, just as Prohibition in the States led to orgies of illicit drinking and every kind of resultant vice. In all things freedom is always socially safer and wiser than governmental restraint.

The Preventive Officers of the Waterguard are supplemented by 4,500 Officers of the Customs and Excise, the so-called outdoor service. They are responsible for the great bulk of the revenue collected by the Department, levying excise on home-produced goods at the place of production, verifying the sales of goods liable to Purchase Tax, and so on. Unlike their service colleagues their activities do not serve the interests of privileged groups. They are on duty at the great petrol depots and at cinemas, on the premises of the football pool promoters and in residence at every brewery and distillery. Until recently they were also on duty at theatres and football grounds but under the terms of this year's Finance Bill which exempts the stage and sport from tax that is no longer necessary. They, too, are men of integrity, highly skilled in duties which should be no concern of civil servants, engaged in calculating the content of privately owned petrol tanks and casks of spirit, and standing by whilst

tobacco is weighed in the bonded warehouses prior to removal to the manufacturing plants. Like their colleagues they are a constant drag on production and a drain on the pool of wealth from which wages are drawn; like them, they make goods artificially dear and depress living standards in obedience to the misguided will of Parliament.

In this writing we have taken care not to blame the civil servants employed by Her Majesty's Commissioners of Customs and Excise. Their loyal diligence commands respect. But the sooner Parliament decrees that their present work shall cease the better for the community at large. Upright men will no longer be obliged to frustrate the natural right of their fellows to buy cheaply, and smugglers will need to find new occupations. Some at least might take up honest work. But however desirable free imports may be, no Government would contemplate "sacrificing" the annual revenue of more than £2,000 million now collected by the Commissioners of Customs and Excise *unless* an alternative source of revenue were available. (This is not to suggest that we are in favour of maintaining expenditure at its present level). Fortunately such a source exists. It lies at our feet waiting to be tapped—the economic rent of land. Legislators must avert their gaze from Britain's ports and sea approaches and turn their eyes downwards. When that is done the "school for smuggler hunters" can be closed. P.R.S.

#### POLITICAL FREEDOM CURTAILED

A POINT BLANK demand by a Labour M.P. for an arbitrary curtailment of political freedom was sympathetically received by a Tory Junior Minister in the Commons on May 1. He was able to assure his questioner that this particular freedom was already denied. Although in practical terms only a minor matter is concerned, the principle at stake is nothing less than the democratic right of associations of free men and women to promote public knowledge of their views. The question referred to the display on railway stations of posters advertising the activities of political parties. The Rt. Hon. NESS EDWARDS, Labour, wanted the Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation to give a general direction to the British Transport Commission that it should not allow such posters to be displayed on its stations. MR. AIREY NEAVE, joint parliamentary secretary to the Minister, replied: "No, Sir. The Commission does not accept politically controversial posters for display." It had accepted a poster which was exhibited in Mr. Edwards' constituency "because it was merely the announcement of a dance, giving necessary information as to time and place" and Mr. Neave was sure that the Commission would consider accepting similar posters from any other party. But he twice repeated, once to Mr. Edwards and once to Mr. Gibson, that posters are accepted "only if they do not contain political propaganda."

In our view this is intolerable. Refusal of seditious matter in order to avoid legal proceedings being taken against the Commission, or of immoral posters likely to offend many passengers is reasonable. Those restrictions

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