

IN HIS OWN WORDS: JOHN DICKINSON ON THE TOWNSHEND ACTS (1767)

Excerpts from *Letter 2 of Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* (1768)

There is another late act of Parliament, which appears to me to be unconstitutional, and as destructive to the liberty of these colonies, as that mentioned in my last letter; that is, the act for granting the duties on paper, glass, &c. [the Townshend Acts].

The Parliament unquestionably possesses a legal authority to regulate the trade of Great-Britain and all her colonies. Such an authority is essential to the relation between a mother country and her colonies; and necessary for the common good of all. He, who considers these provinces as states distinct from the British empire, has very slender notions of justice, or of their interests. We are but parts of a whole; and therefore there must exist a power somewhere to preside, and preserve the connection in due order. This power is lodged in the Parliament; and we are as much dependent on Great-Britain, as a perfectly free people can be on another.

I have looked over every statute relating to these colonies, from their first settlement to this time; and find every one of them founded on this principle, till the Stamp Act administration. All before, are calculated to regulate trade, and preserve or promote a mutually beneficial intercourse between the several constituent parts of the empire; and though many of them imposed duties on trade, yet those duties were always imposed with design to restrain the commerce of one part, that was injurious to another, and thus to promote the general welfare. The raising a revenue thereby was never intended. . . . Never did the British Parliament, till the period above mentioned think of imposing duties in America, FOR THE PURPOSE OF RAISING A REVENUE.

Here we may observe an authority expressly claimed and exerted to impose duties on these colonies; not for the regulation of trade; not for the preservation or promotion of a mutually beneficial intercourse between the several constituent parts of the empire, heretofore the sole objects of parliamentary institutions; but for the single purpose of levying money upon us.

This I call an innovation; and a most dangerous innovation. . . . These colonies require many things for their use, which the laws of Great-Britain prohibit them from getting any where but from her. Such are paper and glass. . . .

Here then, my dear country men ROUSE yourselves, and behold the ruin hanging over your heads. If you ONCE admit, that Great-Britain may lay duties upon her exportations to us, for the purpose of levying money on us only, she then will have nothing to do, but to lay those duties on the articles which she prohibits us to manufacture—and the tragedy of American liberty is finished. . . . If Great-Britain can order us to come to her for necessities we want, and can order us to pay what taxes she pleases before we take them away, or when we land them here, we are as abject slaves. . . .

Source: "Letter 2 of Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer." Teaching American History.org.
<<http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=25>>.

Directions: After reacting to Dickinson's letter in your identity group, underline those sections that reveal his desire for reconciliation with Britain, and circle those sections that reveal his willingness to question British authority.