

English Government in Malta.

The following Letter on this subject, is extracted from the SPECTATOR (London weekly newspaper), of the 2nd January, 1836, No. 392, page 14.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE SPECTATOR.

Cheltenham.

MR. EDITOR, — On my return home lately from the East, where I have been endeavouring to trace the footsteps of my celebrated ancestor, whose rambling propensities I have inherited with his name, I happened to pass through Malta; which little Island I found in a state of great excitement, occasioned by some recent changes in its Government.

On arriving here the other day, I encountered the Governor of that Island; who I suppose has come, like myself, to recruit his liver preparatory to another visit to a warmer climate; and though his Excellency is not a very bilious-looking person, his appearance naturally reminded me of the charges brought against him by his subjects; whose principal complaint, however, was only, to say the truth, that he himself governed too little, and as a natural consequence allowed others to govern too much.

What seemed principally to occupy the public attention when I was in Malta, was the institution of a Council there, which was represented by the Government as a boon graciously conceded by his Majesty to his Maltese subjects; who were, however, so perverse as to complain of this same Council as tending to make matters still worse than they had been before; and which indeed seemed equally unpopular, though for different reasons, with both parties, the governors as well as the governed.

To explain the cause of this unpopularity, it is necessary to observe, that this Council is composed of seven members, presided over by the Governor; that four of these members are persons holding

official situations; and the remaining three unofficial, selected from certain classes, and named by the Governor.

The four official members are—

1. The Bishop.
2. The Senior Military Officer.
3. The Chief Justice.
4. The Chief Secretary to Government.

No objection could reasonably be made to the nomination of the Bishop and the Chief Justice; but against that of the Senior Military Officer it was fairly urged, that this Council was intended for the *civil* not the *military* government of the Island—that the Governor, who was *ex-officio* President of the Council, was himself the Senior Military Officer, and consequently there could be no necessity for the nomination of another officer, the more especially as in a garrison like Malta the individual would be liable to perpetual change.

Against the appointment of the Chief Secretary there seemed to be two objections—one of a public nature, the other personal.

It was contended in the first case, that the Chief Secretary was or ought to be simply an executive officer; and as such should not be permitted to exercise any functions of a legislative nature, the union of which powers in the same individuals is in fact stated to be one of the principal evils complained of under the present system.

The personal objection to the individual now holding this appointment is that he also is a military officer, brought up, moreover, in a very arbitrary school, with less regard or consideration for civil rights and institutions than is becoming in an officer, whose military experience, instead of fighting and starving through the last war, was principally confined to charging a good dinner every day in the palaces of Ceylon, Cufee, and Malta.

But the public indignation was chiefly directed against the appointment of the three unfortunate unofficals, who were supposed to be selected by the Governor—

One from the chief nobility or landed proprietors,
 One from the principal British merchants,
 One from the principal native merchants.

In Malta, it seems that there may be about twenty proprietors with titles of nobility, and with a rental in land averaging from 300*l.* to 1000*l.* per annum; from which number it was expected that the representative member would naturally be selected; but as it is said that the individual actually chosen is not in the possession of landed property to the extent of even 50*l.* a year, his nomination is accounted for on the ground of his *literary merits*, as being the author or rather the compiler of a short History of the Plague, with a very long and very adulatory dedication to his Excellency the Governor.

The representative of the native merchants is also, it seems, a literary character; having written a treatise to prove that the amount of salaries paid to persons holding civil appointments under Government could be of no possible prejudice to the Island, because these salaries were all spent again on the spot. This conclusion might perhaps be proved by the Chief Justice to be what the lawyers call a *non sequitur*; nor is the theory quite in accordance with Adam Smith; but it was not the less agreeable on that account to the Government, which reasonably considered that a political economist of such accommodating principles was fully entitled to a seat in the Council, more especially as having a son in the Church, who might at no distant period be a candidate for the episcopal mitre.

The unlucky representative of the British commercial interests seems to be in a worse position, if possible, than either of his fellow Councillors elect; for the British merchants have formally disclaimed him as a member of their body, or at least affirm that he is not nor ever has been one of the principal merchants of the Island. What seems more certain is, that he has a large family and small means; and that if he prove tractable, as is expected, he may be allowed to pick up a few crumbs from under the Council-table.

This notable Council, thus composed, is only to assemble when his Excellency the Governor is pleased to think it necessary or expedient to ask its advice on any knotty point that he may find it convenient to saddle the Council with the responsibility of; but it has not the power of originating any measure of local relief, much less that of any control over the Executive Government.

Had his Majesty's Government been sincerely desirous of meeting the wishes and expectations of the inhabitants of Malta, nothing could be more practicable than the institution of a Council that would have been really useful. The simple exclusion of the two official members objected to, and the free election of the three unofficial members by the classes they were intended to represent, might have attained this end, had such been the object; but it was no doubt considered both in Downing-street and Strada Reale, that a Council so composed would have been *pessimi exempli*, and might make very inconvenient inquiries into such matters as the amount of revenue squeezed out of the inhabitants—the manner in which that revenue was raised—and, worse than all, the way in which it was spent; and indeed, Mr. Editor, when you consider that a revenue exceeding 100,000*l.* sterling is annually raised and expended for the Civil Government of an Island not larger than the Isle of Wight, such an inquiry would naturally seem to be one of the first duties of an independent Council.

Whatever may be the merits or demerits of the individual members of the present Council, you will no doubt agree with the inhabitants of Malta in looking upon its institution as worse than useless, and with me in concluding that if any grievances do really exist in Malta, they are not likely to be redressed by its Council of Government.

I am, Mr. Editor,
Your friend and well-wisher,
ANTHONY SHIRLEY.