

Defoe Daniel

**An Humble Proposal to  
the People of England,  
for the Increase of...**



**Daniel Defoe**

**An Humble Proposal to the People  
of England, for the Increase of  
their Trade, and Encouragement  
of Their Manufactures. Whether  
the Present Uncertainty of  
Affairs Issues in Peace or War**

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**PREFACE**  
**TO THE**  
**PEOPLE OF ENGLAND**

It deserves some notice, that just at, or soon after writing these sheets, we have an old dispute warmly revived among us, upon the question of our trade being declined, or not declined. I have nothing to do with the parties, nor with the reason of their strife

upon that subject; I think they are wrong on both sides, and yet it is hardly worth while to set them to rights, their quarrel being quite of another nature, and the good of our trade little or nothing concerned in it.

Nor do they seem to desire to be set right, but rather to want an occasion to keep up a strife which perhaps serves some other of their wicked purposes, better than peace would do; and indeed, those who seek to quarrel, who can reconcile?

I meddle not with the question, I say, whether trade be declined or not; but I may easily show the people of England, that if they please to concern themselves a little for its prosperity, it will prosper; and on the contrary, if they will sink it and discourage it, it is evidently in their power, and it will sink and decline accordingly.

You have here some popular mistakes with respect to our woollen manufacture fairly stated, our national indolence in that very particular reproved, and the consequence laid before you; if you will not make use of the hints here given, the fault is nobody's but your own.

Never had any nation the power of improving their trade, and of advancing their own manufactures, so entirely in their own hands as we have at this time, and have had for many years past, without troubling the legislature about it at all: and though it is of the last importance to the whole nation, and, I may say, to almost every individual in it; nay, and that it is evident you all know it to be so; yet how next to impossible is it to persuade any one person

to set a foot forward towards so great and so good a work; and how much labour has been spent in vain to rouse us up to it?

The following sheets are as one alarm more given to the lethargic age, if possible, to open their eyes to their own prosperity; the author sums up his introduction to it in this short positive assertion, which he is ready to make good, viz., That if the trade of England is not in a flourishing and thriving condition, the fault and only occasion of it is all our own, and is wholly in our own power to mend, whenever we please.

# SEASONABLE PROPOSAL, &c

As by my title I profess to be addressing myself to Englishmen, I think I need not tell them that they live by trade; that their commerce has raised them from what they were to what they are, and may, if cultivated and improved, raise them yet further to what they never were; and this in few words is an index of my present work.

It is worth an Englishman's remark, that we were esteemed as a growing thriving nation in trade as far back as in the reigns of the two last Henries; manufactures were planted, navigation increased, the people began to apply, and trade bringing in wealth, they were greatly encouraged; yet in king Henry VIII.'s reign, and even towards the latter end of it, too, we find several acts of parliament passed for regulating the price of provisions, and particularly that beef and pork should not be sold in the market for more than a halfpenny per pound avoirdupoise, and mutton and veal at three farthings.

As the trading men to whom I write may make some estimate of things by calculating one thing by another, so this leads them to other heads of trade to calculate from; as, first, the value of money, which bore some proportion, though I think not a full and just equality to the provisions, as follows: – silver was at 2s. 4d. per ounce, and gold at 2*l.* 5s. to 2*l.* 10s. per ounce; something less in the silver, and more in the gold than half of the present value.

As for the rate of lands and houses, they bore a yet greater distance in value from what they produce now; so that indeed it bears no proportion, for we find the rent of lands so raised, and their value so improved, that there are many examples where the lands, valued even in queen Elizabeth's days at 20*l.* to 25*l.* per annum, are now worth from 200*l.* to 300*l.* per annum, and in some places much more.

It is true, this advance is to be accounted for by the improvement made of the soil, by manuring, cultivating, and enclosing; by stocks of cattle, by labour, and by the arts of husbandry, which are also improved; and so this part is not so immediately within my present design; it is a large subject, and merits to be spoken of at large by itself; because as the improvement of land has been extraordinary great, and the landed interest is prodigiously increased by it, so it is capable of much more and greater improvement than has been made for above a hundred years past. But this I say is not my present design; it is too great an article to be couched in a few words.

Yet it requires this notice here; viz., that trade has been a principal agent even in the improvement of our land; as it has furnished the money to the husbandman to stock his land, and to employ servants and labourers in the working part; and as it has found him a market for the consumption of the produce of his land, and at an advanced price too, by which he has received a good return to enable him to go on.

The short inference from these premises is this: as by trade



the whole kingdom is thus advanced in wealth, and the value of lands, and of the produce of lands, and of labour, is so remarkably increased, why should we not go on with vigour and spirit in trade, and by all proper and possible methods and endeavours, increase and cultivate our commerce; that we may still increase and improve in wealth, in value of lands, in stock, and in all the arts of trade, such as manufactures, navigation, fishery, husbandry, and, in short, study an improvement of trade in all its branches.

No doubt it would be our wisdom to do thus; and nothing of the kind can be more surprising than that it should not be our practice; and thus I am brought down to the case before me.

If it should be objected that the remark is needless, that we are an industrious and laborious people, that we are the best manufacturers in the world, thoroughly versed in all the methods and arts for that purpose; and that our trade is improved to the utmost in all places, and all cases possible; if it should, I say, be thus argued, for I know some have such a taint of our national vanity that they do talk at this rate, —

My answer is short, and direct in the negative; and I do affirm that we are not that industrious, applying, improving people that we pretend to be, and that we ought to be, and might be. That we are the best manufacturers I deny; and yet at the same time I grant that we make the best manufactures in the world; but the reason of that is greatly owing not to our own skill exceeding others, so much as to our being furnished from the bounty of Heaven with

the best materials and best conveniencies for the work, of any nation in the world, of which I shall take notice in its place.

But not to dwell upon our capacities for improving in trade, I might clear all that part without giving up the least article of my complaint; for it is not our capacity to improve that I call in question, but our application to the right methods; nay, I must add, that while I call upon your diligence, and press you to application, I am supposed to grant your capacities; otherwise I was calling upon you to no purpose, and pressing you to do what at the same time I allowed you had no power to perform.

Without complimenting your national vanity, therefore, I am to grant you have not only the means of improvement in your hands, but the capacity of improving also; and on this account I must add, are the more inexcusable if the thing is not in practice.

Indeed it is something wonderful, and not easy to be accounted for, that a whole nation should, as if they were in a lethargic dream, shut their eyes to the apparent advantages of their commerce; and this just now, when their circumstances seem so evidently to stand in need of encouragement, and that they are more than ordinarily at a kind of stop in their usual progression of trade.

It is debated much among men of business, whether trade is at this time in a prosperous and thriving condition, or in a languishing and declining state; or, in a word, whether we are going backwards or forward. I shall not meddle with that debate here, having no occasion to take up the little space allowed me in

anything remote from my design. But I will propose it as I really believe it to be: namely, that we are rather in a state of balance between both, a middle between the extremes; I hope we are not much declined, and I fear we are not much advanced. But I must add, that if we do not immediately set about some new methods for altering this depending condition, we shall soon decline; and on the contrary, if we should exert ourselves, we have before us infinite advantages of improving and advancing our commerce, and that to a great degree.

This is stating it to the meanest understanding; there is no mystery at all in the thing; if you will apply, you will rise; if you will remain indolent and inactive, you will sink and starve. Trade in England, at this time, is like a ship at sea, that has sprung a leak in sight of the shore, or within a few days' sail of it; if the crew will ply their pump and work hard, they may not only keep her above water, but will bring her safe into port; whereas if they neglect the pump, or do not exert their strength, the water grows upon them and they are in apparent danger of sinking before they reach the shore.

Or, if you will have a coarser comparison, take the pump room in the rasp-house, or house of correction, at Amsterdam; where the slothful person is put into a good, dry, and wholesome room, with a pump at one side and a spring or water-pipe at the other; if he pleases to work, he may live and keep the water down, but if he sleeps he drowns.

The moral is exactly the same in both cases, and suits with the

present circumstances of our trade in England most exactly, only with this difference to the advantage of the latter; namely, that the application which I call upon the people of England to exert themselves in, is not a mere labour of the hand; I do not tax the poor with mere sloth and negligence, idly lying still when they should work, that is not our grievance at present; for though there may be too much of that sort too, among a few of the drunken, loitering part of mankind, and they suffer for it sufficiently in their poverty, yet that, I say, is not the point, idleness is not here a national crime, the English are not naturally a slothful, indolent, or lazy people.

But it is an application proper to the method of business which is wanting among us, and in this we shall find room for reproof on one hand, and direction on the other; and our reader, I dare say, will acknowledge there is reason for both.

It must in the first place be acknowledged, that England has indeed the greatest encouragement for their industry of any nation in Europe; and as therefore their want of improving those advantages and encouragements, lays them more open to our just reproof, than other nation's would be, or can be who want them, so it moves me with the more importunity to press home the argument, which reason and the nature of the thing furnishes, to persuade them. Reason dictates that no occasion should be let slip by which England above all nations in the world should improve the advantages they have in their hands; not only because they have them, but because their people so universally depend upon

them. The manufactures are their bread, the life, the comfort of their poor, and the soul of their trade; nature dictates, that as they are given them to improve, and that by industry and application they are capable of being improved; so they ought to starve if they do not improve them to the utmost.

Let us see in a few words what nature and providence has done for us; nay, what they have done for us exclusive of the rest of the world. The bounty of Heaven has stored us with the principles of commerce, fruitful of a vast variety of things essential to trade, and which call upon us as it were in the voice of nature, bidding us work, and with annexed encouragement to do so from the visible apparent success of industry. Here the voice of the world is plain, like the answer of an oracle; thus, dig and find, plough and reap, fish and take, spin and live; in a word, trade and thrive; and this with such extraordinary circumstances, that it is as if there was a bar upon the neighbouring nations, and it had been spoken from Heaven thus: These are for you only, and not for any other nation; you, my favourites, of England; you, singled out to be great, opulent, powerful, above all your neighbours, and to be made so by your own industry and my bounty.

To explain this, allow me a small digression, to run over the detail of Heaven's bounty, and see what God and nature has done for us beyond what it has done for other nations; nature, as I have said, will dictate to us what Heaven expects from us, for the improving the blessings bestowed, and for making ourselves that rich and powerful people which he has determined us to be.

Our country is furnished, I say, with the principles of commerce in a very extraordinary manner; that is to say, so as no other country in Europe, or perhaps in the world, is supplied with.

I. With the product of the earth. This is of two kinds: 1. That of the inside or bowels of the earth, the same of which, as above, the voice of Heaven to us, is, dig and find, under which article is principally our lead, and tin-coal; I name these only, because of these this island seems to have an exclusive grant; there being none, or but very small quantities of them, found in any other nation; and it is upon exclusive benefits that I am chiefly speaking. 2. We have besides these, iron, copper, *lapis calaminaris*, vulgarly called callamy, with several other minerals, which may be said to be in common to us and the rest of the world, of which the particulars at large, and the places where they are found, may be fully seen in a late tract, of which I shall have frequently occasion to speak in this work, entitled, A Plan of the Commerce of Great Britain, to which I refer, as indeed to a general index of the trade and produce of this whole island.

II. The product of the surface, which I include in that part, plough and reap; and though this is not indeed an exclusive product, yet I may observe that the extraordinary increase which our lands, under an excellent cultivation, generally yield, as well in corn and cattle, is an uncommon argument for the industry of the husbandmen; and I might enter into a comparison with advantage, against almost any countries in Europe, by comparing

the quantity produced on both sides, with the quantity of land which produce those quantities.

You may find some calculations of the produce of our own country in the book above mentioned, viz., *The Plan of the Commerce of Great Britain*, where the consumption of malt in England is calculated by the value of the duties of excise, and where it appears that there is annually consumed in England, besides what is exported to foreign countries, forty millions of bushels of malt, besides also all the barley, the meal of which is made into bread, which is a very great quantity; most of the northern counties in England feeding very much upon barley bread; and besides all the barley either exported or used at home in the corn unmalted; all which put together, I am assured, amounts to no less than ten millions of bushels more.

The quantity of barley only is so exceeding great, that I am told it bears, in proportion to the land it grows on, an equality to as much land in France, as all the sowed land in the whole kingdom of England; or take it thus, that fifty millions of bushels of barley growing in France, would take up as much ground as all the lands which are at any time sowed in England with any corn, whether barley, oats, or wheat.

N. B. I do not say all the arable lands of England, because we know there are a very great number of acres of land which every year lie fallow (though in tillage) and unsowed, according to the usage of our husbandry; so they cannot be reckoned to produce any corn at all, otherwise the quantity might be much greater.

This is a testimony of the fertility of our soil; and on the other hand, the fertility is a testimony of the diligence and application of our people, and the success which attends that diligence.

We are told that in some parts of England, especially in the counties of Essex, Hertford, Cambridge, Bedford, Bucks, Oxford, Northampton, Lincoln, and Nottingham, it is very frequent to have the lands produce from seven to ten quarters of barley upon an acre, which is a produce not heard of in the most fruitful of all those we call corn countries abroad, much less in France. On the contrary, if they have a great produce of corn, it is because they have a vast extent of land for it to grow upon, and which land they either have no other use for, or it may be is fit for no other use; whereas our corn grounds are far from being the richest or the best of our lands, the prime of our land being laid up, as the ploughmen call it, to feed upon, that is, to keep dairies of cows, as in Essex, Suffolk, and the fens; or for grazing grounds, for fattening the large mutton and beef, for which England is so particularly famed. These grazing countries are chiefly in Sussex, and in the marshes of Romney, and other parts in Kent; also in the rich vales of Aylesbury, and others in Bucks and Berkshire, the isle of Ely, the bank of Trent, the counties of Lincoln, Leicester and Stafford, Warwick and Chester, as also in the county of Somerset, Lancaster, north riding of Yorkshire, and bank of Tees, in the bishoprick of Durham.

When this product of England is considered, the diligence and success of our husbandry in England will be found to be



beyond that of the most industrious people in Europe. But I must not dwell here, my view lies another way; nor do the people of England want so much to be called upon to improve in husbandry, as they do in manufactures and other things; not but that even in this, the lands not yet cultivated do call aloud upon us too; but I say it is not the present case.

I come in the next article to that yet louder call of the oracle, as above, namely, fish and take. Indeed this is an improvement not fully preserved, or a produce not sufficiently improved; the advantages nature offers here cannot be said to be fully accepted of and embraced.

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