A PLAN FOR COLONIAL UNION

Benjamin Franklin

Table of Contents

A PLAN FOR COLONIAL UNION

Benjamin Franklin

The following letters, though first published in 1766, were dated late in 1754, the year that the actual fighting of the French and Indian War began in the Ohio Valley. They were addressed to William Shirley (1694−1771), governor of Massachusetts. In June and July of 1754 Franklin had attended the Albany Conference, where negotiations with the Indian allies of the colonies and discussion of plans for colonial union had been carried on simultaneously. At that time his famous "Albany Plan," somewhat modified from his original proposals, was unanimously accepted and recommended to the British and colonial governments (Complete Works.... II, 343−75). In his Autobiography Franklin briefly summarizes his plan and sets forth the circumstances in which his letters to Shirley were written:

By this plan the general government was to be administered by a President−General appointed and supported by the Crown, and a Grand Council was to be chosen by the representatives of the people of the several colonies, met in their respective assemblies. . . . Its fate was singular: the assemblies did not adopt it, as they all thought there was too much prerogative in it, and in England it was judged to have too much of the democratic....

Another scheme was formed . . . whereby the governors of the provinces, with some members of their respective councils, were to meet and order the raising of boons building of forts, etc., and to draw on the treasury of Great Britain for the expense, which afterward to be refunded by an act of Parliament laying a tax on America ... (ibid., I, 243−44).]

LETTER I

CONCERNING THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE IN CHOOSING THE RULERS BY WHOM TAXES ARE IMPOSED

TUESDAY MORNING [December 17, 1754]

SIR:

I return return you the loose sheets of the plan, with thanks to your Excellency for communicating them.

I apprehend that excluding the people of the colonies from all share in the choice of the grand council will give extreme dissatisfaction, as well as the taxing them by act of Parliament, where they have no representative. It is very possible that this general government might be as well and faithfully administered without the people as with them; but where heavy burthens have been laid on them, it has been found useful to make it as much as possible their own act; for they bear better, when they have, or think they have, some share in the direction; and when any

public measures are generally grievous, or even distasteful, to the people, the wheels of government move more heavily.

LETTER II

ON THEed without the people as with them; but where heavy burthens have been laid on them, it has been found useful to make it as much as possible their own act; for they bear better, when they have, or think they have, some share in the direction; and when any public measures are generally grievous, or even distasteful, to the people, the wheels of government move more heavily.

LETTER II

ON THE IMPOSITION OF DIRECT TAXES UPON THE COLONIES WITHOUT THEIR CONSENT

WEDNESDAY MORNING [December 18, 1754]

SIR:

I mentioned it yesterday to your Excellency as my opinion that excluding the people of the colonies from all share in the choice of the grand council would probably give extreme dissatisfaction, as well as the taxing them by act of Parliament, where they have no representative. In matters of general concern to the people, and especially where burthens are to be laid upon them, it is of use to consider, as well what they will be apt to think and say, as what they ought to think. I shall therefore, as your Excellency requires it of me, briefly mention what of either kind occurs to me on this occasion.

First, they will say, and perhaps with justice, that the body of the people in the colonies are as loyal and as firmly attached to the present constitution and reigning family as any subjects in the king's dominions.

That there is no reason to doubt the readiness and willingness of the representatives they may choose to grant from time to time such supplies for the defense of the country as shall be judged necessary, so far as their abilities will allow.

That the people in the colonies who are to feel the immediate mischiefs of invasion and conquest by an enemy, in the loss of their estates, lives, and liberties, are likely to be better judges of the quantity of forces necessary to be raised and maintained, forts to be built and supported. and of their own abilities to bear the expense than the Parliament of England at so great a distance.

That governors often come to the colonies merely to make fortunes, with which they intend to return to Britain; are not always men of the best abilities and integrity; have many of them no estates here, nor any natural connections with us that should make them heartily concerned for our welfare; and might possibly be fond of raising and keeping up more forces than necessary, from the profits accruing to themselves, and to make provision for their friends and dependents.

That the conselors in most of the colonies being appointed by the crown, on the recommendation of governors, are often persons of small estates, frequently dependent on the governors for offices, and therefore too much under influence. [2]

That there is therefore great reason to be jealous of a power in such governors and councils to raise such sums as they shall judge necessary, by draft on the Lords of the Treasury, to be afterward laid on the colonies by act of Parliament, and paid by the people here; since they might abuse it by projecting useless expeditions, harassing the people, and taking them from their labor to execute such projects, merely to create offices and employments, and gratify their dependents, and divide profits.

That the Parliament of England is at a great distance, subject to the misinformed and misled by such governors and councils, whose united interests might probably secure them against the effect of any complaint from hence.

That it is supposed an undoubted right of Englishmen not to be taxed but by their own consent, given through their representatives.

That the colonies have no representatives in Parliament.

That to propose taxing them by Parliament, and refuse them the liberty of choosing a representative council to meet in the colonies, and consider and judge of the necessity of any general tax and the quantum, shows a suspicion of their loyalty to the crown, or of their regard for their country, or of their common sense and understanding, which they have not deserved.

That compelling the colonies to pay money without their consent would be rather like raising contributions in an enemy's country than taxing of Englishmen for their own public benefit.

That it would be treating them as a conquered people and not as true British subjects.

That a tax laid by the representatives of the colonies might easily be lessened as the occasions should lessen; but being once laid by Parliament, under the influence of the representations made by governors, would probably be kept up and continued for the benefit of governors, to the grievous burthen and discouragement of the colonies, and prevention of their growth and increase.

That a power in governors to march the inhabitants from one end of the British and French colonies to the other, being a country of at least 1,500 square miles, without the approbation or the consent of their representatives first obtained to such expeditions, might be grievous and ruinous to the people, and would put them on a footing with the subjects of France in Canada, that now groan under such oppression from their governor, who for two years past has harassed them with long and destructive marches to Ohio.

That if the colonies in a body may be well governed by governors and councils appointed by the crown, without representatives, particular colonies may as well or better be so governed; a tax may be laid upon them all by act of Parliament for support of government, and their assemblies may be dismissed as a useless part of the constitution.

That the powers, proposed by the Albany Plan of Union to be vested in a grand council representative of the people, even with regard to military matters, are not so great as those the colonies of Rhode Island and Connecticut are intrusted with by their charters and have never abused; for, by this plan, the president−general is appointed by the crown and controls all by his negative; but in those governments the people choose the governor and yet allow him no negative.

That the British colonies bordering on the French are properly frontiers of the British Empire; and the frontiers of an empire are properly defended at the joint expense of the body of the people in such empire. It would now be thought hard by act of Parliament to oblige the Cinque Ports or seacoasts of Britain to maintain the whole navy, because they are more immediately defended by it, not allowing them at the same time a vote in choosing members of the Parliament; [3] and if the frontiers of America bear the expense of their own defense, it seems hard to allow them no share in voting the money, judging of the necessity and sum, or advising the measures.

That, besides the taxes necessary for the defense of the frontiers, the colonies pay yearly great sums to the mother−country unnoticed: for

1. Taxes paid in Britain by the landholder or artificer must enter into and increase the price of the produce of land and of manufactures made of it; and a great part of this is paid by consumers in the colonies, who thereby pay a considerable part of the British taxes.

2. We are restrained in our trade with foreign nations; and where we could be supplied with any manufacture cheaper from them, but must buy the same dearer from Britain, the difference of price is a clear tax to Britain.

3. We are obliged to carry a great part of our produce directly to Britain; and where the duties laid upon it lessen its price to the planter, or it sells for less than it would in foreign markets, the difference is a tax paid to Britain.

4. Some manufactures we could make, but are forbidden, and must take them of British merchants; the whole price is a tax paid to Britain.

5. By our greatly increasing the demand and consumption of British manufactures, their price is considerably raised of late years; the advantage is clear profit to Britain and enables its people hefter to pay great taxes; and much of it, being paid by us, is clear tax to Britain.

6. In short, as we are not suffered to regulate our trade and restrain the importation and consumption of British superfluities, as Britain can the consumption of foreign superfluities, our whole wealth centers finally amongst the merchants and inhabitants of Britain; and if we make them richer, and enable them better to pay their taxes, it is nearly the same as being taxed ourselves and equally beneficial to the crown.

These kinds of secondary taxes, however, we do not complain of, though we have no share in the laying or disposing of them; but to pay immediate heavy taxes, in the laying, appropriation, and disposition of which we have no part, and which perhaps we may know to be as unnecessary as grievous, must seem hard measure to Englishmen, who cannot conceive that by hazarding their lives and fortunes in subduing and settling new countries, extending the dominion and increasing the commerce of the mother−nation, they have forfeited the native rights of Britons, which they think ought rather to be given to them, as due to such merit, if they had been before in a state of slavery.

These, and such kind of things as these, I apprehend will be thought and said by the people, if the proposed alteration of the Albany plan should take place. Then the administration of the board of governors and council so appointed, not having any representative body of the people to approve and unite m its measures, and conciliate the minds of the people to them, will probably become suspected and odious, dangerous animosities and feuds will arise between the governors and governed, and every thing go into confusion.

Perhaps I am too apprehensive in this matter; but, having freely given my opinion and reasons, your Excellency can judge better than I whether there be any weight in them; and the shortness of the time allowed me will, I hope, in some degree excuse the imperfections of this scrawl.

With the greatest respect and fidelity, I have the honor to be

Your Excellency's most obedient and most humble servant, B. FRANKLIN

LETTER III

ON THE SUBJECT OF UNITING THE COLONIES MORE INTIMATELY WITH GREAT BRITAIN BY ALLOWING THEM REPRESENTATIVES IN PARLIAMENT

BOSTON, December 22, 1754

SIR:

Since the conversation your Excellency was pleased to honor me with, on the subject of uniting the colonies more intimately with Great Britain, by allowing them representatives in Parliament, I have something further considered that matter and am of opinion that such a union would be very acceptable to the colonies, provided they had a reasonable number of representatives allowed them; and that all the old acts of Parliament restraining the trade or cramping the manufactures of the colonies be at the same time repealed, and the British subjects on this side the water put, in those respects, on the same footing with those in Great Britain, till the new Parliament, representing the whole, shall think it for the interest of the whole to re−enact some or all of them. It is not that I imagine so many representatives will be allowed the colonies as to have any great weight by their numbers, but I think there might be sufficient to occasion those laws to be better and more impartially considered, and perhaps to overcome the interest of a petty corporation, or of any particular set of artificers or traders in England, who heretofore seem, in some instances, to have been more regarded than all the colonies or than was consistent with the general interest or best national good. I think, too, that the government of the colonies by a Parliament in which they are fairly represented would be vastly more agreeable to the people than the method lately attempted to be introduced by royal instructions, as well as more agreeable to the nature of an English constitution and to English liberty; [4] and that such laws as now seem to bear hard on the colonies would (when judged by such a Parliament for the best interest of the whole) be more cheerfully submitted to and more easily executed.

I should hope, too, that by such a union the people of Great Britain and the people of the colonies would learn to consider themselves as not belonging to a different community with different interests but to one community with one interest, which I imagine would contribute to strengthen the whole and greatly lessen the danger of future separations.

It is, I suppose, agreed to be the general interest of any state that its people be numerous and rich; men enough to fight in its defense and enough to pay sufficient taxes to defray the charge; for these circumstances tend to the security of the state and its protection from foreign power. But it seems not of so much importance whether the fighting be done by John or Thomas, or the tax paid by William or Charles. The iron manufacture employs and enriches British subjects, but is it of any importance to the state whether the manufacturers live at Birmingham, or Sheffield, or both, since they are still within its bounds, and their wealth and persons still at its command? Could the Goodwin Sands be laid dry by banks, [5] and land equal to a large country thereby gained to England, and presently filled with English inhabitants, would it be right to deprive such inhabitants of the common privileges enjoyed by other Englishmen — the right of vending their produce in the same ports, or of making their own shoes, because a merchant or a shoemaker living on the old land might fancy it more for his advantage to trade or make shoes for them? Would this be right even if the land were gained at the expense of the state? And would it not seem less right if the charge and labor of gaining the additional territory to Britain had been borne by the settlers themselves? And would not the hardship appear yet greater if the people of the new country should be allowed no representatives in the Parliament enacting such impositions?

Now, I look on the colonies as so many countries gained to Great Britain, and more advantageous to it than if they had been gained out of the seas around it of coasts and joined to its land; for, being in different climates, they afford greater variety of produce, and being separated by the ocean, they increase much more its shipping and seamen; and since they are all included in the British Empire, which has only extended itself by their means, and the strength and wealth of the parts are the strength and wealth of the whole, what imports it to the general state whether a merchant, a smith, or a hatter grow rich in Old or New England? And if, through increase of people, two smiths are wanted for one employed before, why may not the new smith be allowed to live and thrive in the new country, as well as the old in the old? In fine, why should the countenance of a state be partially afforded to its people, unless it be most in favor of those who have most merit? And if there be any difference, those who

have most contributed to enlarge Britain's empire and commerce, increase her strength, her wealth, and the numbers of her people, at the risk of their own lives and private fortunes in new and strange countries, methinks ought rather to expect some preference. With the greatest respect and esteem, I have the honor to be

Your Excellency's most obedient and most humble servant, B. FRANKLIN

_____

1. Benjamin Franklin, Complete Works .... ed.. John Bigelow (New York, 1887), II, 376− 87.

2. Here Franklin refers to the members of the governor's councils which in most of the colonies served as one house of the colonial legislature. They were usually appointed by the crown on the recommendations of the British Board of Trade. In proprietary colonies they were appointed by the proprietor(s), and in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut they were elected. The councils also served as judicial and executive bodies.

3. In the Middle Ages the Cinque Ports (originally Dover, Sandwich, Hastings, Hythe, and Romney — other towns added later) fulfilled their feudal obligations to the king of England by furnishing him with the ships and sailors for his expeditionary forces to the Continent or to Ireland. In return these towns received important privileges.

4. When a royal governor was appointed, the British Privy Council gave him a set of instructions to indicate his powers and to serve as a guide to important problems of colonial administration.

5. The Goodwin Sands are a range of shoals at the entrance to the North Sea from th Straits of Dover.