

## The Stamp Act, 1765: Jared Ingersoll's account of the parliamentary debate, 11 February 1765.

Jared Ingersoll was the colonial agent in London for the colony of Connecticut. He wrote this account of the parliamentary debate on the [Stamp Act](#) to the governor of Connecticut, Thomas Fitch.

The principal attention has been to the stamp bill that has been preparing to lay before Parliament for taxing America. The point of the authority of Parliament to impose such tax I found was so fully and universally yielded that there was not the least hopes of making any impressions that way. ...

The House of Commons, say they, is a branch of the supreme legislature of the nation, and which in its nature is supposed to represent, or rather to stand in the place of ... the great body of the people who are below the dignity of peers; ... that this House of Commons is now fixed and ascertained and is a part of the supreme unlimited power of the nation, as in every state there must be some unlimited power and authority; and that when it is said they represent the commons of England it cannot mean that they do so because those commons choose them, for in fact by far the greater part do not, but because by their constitution they must themselves be commoners and not peers, and so the equals, or of the same class of subjects, with the commons of the kingdom. They further urge that the only reason why America has not been heretofore taxed in the fullest manner has been merely on account of their infancy and inability; that there have been, however, not wanting instances of the exercise of this power in the various regulations of the American trade, the establishment of the post office, etc., and they deny any distinction between what is called an internal and external tax as to the point of the authority imposing such taxes. And as to the charters in the few provinces where there are any, they say in the first place the king cannot grant any that shall exempt them from the authority of one of the branches of the great body of legislation, and in the second place say the king has not done or attempted to do it. In that of Pennsylvania the authority of Parliament to impose taxes is expressly mentioned and reserved; in ours 'tis said, our powers are generally such as are *according to the course of other corporations in England*; in short, they say a power to tax is a necessary part of every supreme legislative authority, and that if they have not that power over America. they have none, and then America is at once a kingdom of itself.

On the other hand, those who [oppose the bill](#) say it is true the Parliament have a supreme unlimited authority over every part and branch of the king's dominions, and as well over [Ireland](#) as any other place, yet we believe a British Parliament will never think it prudent to tax Ireland. 'Tis true they say that the commons of England and of the British Empire are all represented in and by the House of Commons, but this representation is confessedly on all hands by construction and virtually only as to those who have no hand in choosing the representatives, and that the effects of this implied representation here and in America must be infinitely different in the article of taxation. Here in England the member of Parliament is equally known to the neighbour who elects and to him who does not; the friendships, the connections, the influences are spread through the whole. If by any mistake an Act of Parliament is made that prove injurious and hard, the member of Parliament here sees with his own eyes and is moreover very

accessible to the people not only so, but the taxes are laid equally by one rule and fall as well on the member himself as on the people. But as to America, from the great distance in point of situation, from the almost total unacquaintedness, especially in the more northern colonies, with the members of Parliament, and they with them, or with the particular ability and circumstances of one another, from the nature of this very tax laid upon others not equally and in common with ourselves, but with express purpose to ease ourselves, we think, say they, that it will be only to lay a foundation of great jealousy and continual uneasiness, and that to no purpose, as we already by the regulations upon their trade draw from the Americans all that they can spare. At least they say this step should not take place until or unless the Americans are allowed to send members to Parliament for *who of you*, said Col. Isaac Barr♦ nobly in his speech in the House upon this occasion; *who of you reasoning upon this subject feels warmly from the heart for the Americans as they would for themselves or as you would for the people of your own native country?*

I have given you the substance of the arguments on both sides of that great and important question of the right and also of the expediency of taxing America by authority of Parliament, I cannot, however, content myself without giving you a sketch of what the aforementioned Mr. Barr♦ said in answer to some remarks made by [Mr. Charles Townshend](#) in a speech of his upon this subject. I ought here to tell you that the debate upon the American stamp bill came on before the House for the first time last Wednesday, when the same was opened by [Mr. Grenville](#), the Chancellor of the Exchequer, in a pretty lengthy speech, and in a very able, and very candid manner he opened the nature of the tax, urged the necessity of it, endeavoured to obviate all objections to it - and took occasion to desire the House to give the bill a most serious and cool consideration and not suffer themselves to be influenced by any resentments which might have been kindled from anything they might have heard out of doors - alluding, I suppose, to the New York and Boston Assemblies' speeches and votes - that this was a matter of revenue which was of all things the most interesting to the subject, etc. The argument was taken up by several who opposed the bill (viz.) by Alderman Beckford, who, and who only, seemed to deny the authority of Parliament, by Col. Barr♦, Mr. Jackson, [Sir William Meredith](#), and some others. Mr. Barr♦, is, one of the finest speakers that the House can boast of, having been some time in America as an officer in the army, and having while there contracted many friendships with American gentlemen, and I believe entertained much more favourable opinions of them than some of his profession have done, delivered a very handsome and moving speech upon the bill and against the same, concluding by saying that he was very sure that most who should hold up their hands to the bill must be under a necessity of acting very much in the dark, but added perhaps as well in the dark as any way.

After him Mr. Charles Townshend spoke in favour of the bill - took notice of several things Mr. Barr♦ had said, and concluded with the following or like words: "and now will these Americans, children planted by our care, nourished up by our Indulgence until they are grown to a degree of strength and opulence, and protected by our arms, will they grudge to contribute their mite to relieve us from heavy weight of the burden which we lie under?" When he had done, Mr. Barr♦ rose, and having explained something which he had before said and which Mr. Townshend had been remarking upon, he then took up the before mentioned concluding words

of Mr. Townshend, and in a most spirited and I thought an almost inimitable manner, said:

"They planted by your care? No! Your oppression planted ♦em in America. They fled from your tyranny to a then uncultivated and inhospitable country where they exposed themselves to almost all the hardships to which human nature is liable, and among others to the cruelties of a savage foe, the most subtle, and I take upon me to say, the most formidable of any people upon the face of God's earth. And yet, actuated by principles of true English liberty, they met all these hardships with pleasure, compared with those they suffered in their own country, from the hands of those who should have been their friends.

"They nourished by *your* indulgence? They grew by your neglect of ♦em. As soon as you began to care about ♦em, that care was exercised in sending persons to rule over 'em, in one department and another, who were perhaps the deputies of deputies to some member of this house, sent to spy out their liberty, to misrepresent their actions and to prey upon 'em; men whose behaviour on many occasions has caused the blood of those sons of liberty to recoil within them: men promoted to the highest seats of justice; some who to my knowledge were glad by going to a foreign country to escape being brought to the bar of a court of justice in their own.

"They protected by *your* arms? They have nobly taken up arms in your defence, have exerted a valour amidst their constant and laborious industry for the defence of a country whose frontier while drenched in blood, its interior parts have yielded all its little savings to your emolument. And believe me, remember I this day told you so, that same spirit of freedom which actuated that people at first, will accompany them still. But prudence forbids me to explain myself further. God knows I do not at this time speak from motives of party heat; what I deliver are the genuine sentiments of my heart; however superior to me in general knowledge and experience the reputable body of this House may be, yet I claim to know more of America than most of you, having seen and been conversant in that country. The people I believe are as truly loyal as any subjects the king has, but a people jealous of their liberties and who will vindicate them if ever they should be violated; but the subject is too delicate and I will say no more."

These sentiments were thrown out so entirely without premeditation, so forcibly and so firmly, and the breaking off so beautifully abrupt, that the whole House sat a while as amazed, intently looking and without answering a word. I own I felt emotions that I never felt before and went the next morning and thanked Col. Barr♦ on behalf of my country for his noble and spirited speech.