

*Commons Sitting of Saturday, 11th February 1893*

*House of Commons Hansard*

*Parliament Session: 1893-94*

Extract from DESTITUTE ALIENS (IMMIGRATION).cc.1154-1222

Mr. James Lowther [Conservative MP for Thanet in Kent]:..... The evil with which I now ask Her Majesty's Government to deal has been largely increasing in this country during the last few years. It is not only with the actual immigration of alien paupers that the Government will have to deal; but they will have also to reckon with the state of public opinion which that unrestricted immigration has formulated. I am aware that a strong opinion prevails in many quarters that my proposal is of a half-hearted character, many persons desiring that a measure should be introduced of a mere stringent nature, and that it should be in the direction of the total exclusion of alien immigrants. Many Trades Councils and other Public Bodies, composed of politicians of all Parties, especially those which now directly represent the labouring classes, desire to see a measure of a most stringent character passed into law that would have the effect of prohibiting not only the immigration of the destitute persons with whom my Motion proposes to deal, but also of stopping the competition with home labour—whether the immigrant arrives in this country in an affluent or in a destitute condition.

But that is not a matter with which I propose to deal to-day. .... the evil is increasing, notwithstanding the denial of the right hon. Baronet the Member for the Forest of Dean. We are constantly met by statistics which, it is asserted, show that the total number of foreigners in this country form but an infinitesimal proportion of our total population; but even taking the official figures, which, in my opinion, are absolutely unreliable, they show that there has been an increase of 35 per cent. in the foreign population of the country between the Census of 1881 and the last Census.... It is notorious, it was pointed out by a Select Committee of this House, that these immigrants congregate in a few specified localities, and attach themselves to particular trades and callings upon which they exercise a very marked effect. There are those who evade the definition of foreigners by the adoption of an English name, or in a smaller number of cases by going through the process of naturalisation, and the House should bear that in mind in connection with the figures laid before it.

...I should like to draw the special attention of the House to the character and race of great numbers of these immigrants. There can, for instance, be no doubt that Italian immigration has been carried on largely into this country, and, I believe, mainly into the Metropolis. Many Italian children are annually imported for the purpose of carrying on a trade which comes within the laws of mendicity [begging] and vagrancy. Those who have the management of Government Departments must know full well that this is a matter of notoriety, and no hon. Member will, I feel sure, be found to defend, on its merits, such a state of things. Ought such a gross outrage to be any longer perpetrated upon the hospitality of this country?

There are, no doubt, graver causes of complaint with respect to the great numbers of immigrants entering this country from the Russian Empire, of whom a large proportion are of the Jewish race.... they are to be found in the ruinous competition which has been brought into play with regard to our home labour markets. In particular localities and in certain trades, as I said before, this undue competition is extremely severe. It is notorious that the tailoring trade, for instance, as was shown by the evidence given before the Sweating Committee, is absolutely overrun by these destitute foreign immigrants. The percentage of foreigners in the London tailoring trade has been put as high as 90 per cent. of the whole number of workers engaged in that trade; while the figure given by Mr. Burnett, the Labour Correspondent of the Board of Trade, who is considered rather to understate than to overstate the matter, is 80 per cent. in Loudon. That is to say, out of 18,000 or 20,000 persons engaged in the trade, only a few hundreds are of the Anglo-Saxon race. The system of employing aliens, too, is spreading to Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Glasgow, and other large towns, and the ready-made clothing trade is falling almost entirely into foreign hands. Again, in the boot and shoe trade, 25 per cent. of those employed in London are foreigners; and these are constantly on the increase, while a similar condition of affairs prevails in the case of the cabinet makers. There are other trades which, though less important, have in the past at Ordered employment to considerable numbers of our own people, and these are being more and more absorbed by foreigners. Of these minor industries, I may cite as examples artificial flower making, stick-polishing, and work of that sort. Many persons who formerly gained an honest livelihood by those trades have now become chargeable to the rates [reliant on local funds given to the poor], because they are unable to get employment in consequence of the large influx of foreigners. That is not all. Many of these aliens, arriving in a destitute condition, not only themselves become chargeable upon the rates, but they constructively add to the demands upon public charity, and upon the pockets of the ratepayers,

by throwing out of employment our own workpeople....My own opinion is, that a not inconsiderable number find their way on to the rates; but no private individual or Government Department that could be created could ever present accurate statistics to show the number of persons thrown upon the rates as the indirect effect of this foreign competition.

There is another serious matter which must be taken into consideration in connection with this subject. I refer to sanitary grounds, on which this alien immigration is a very serious and grave national danger. In the last few months we have had an only too well-founded alarm with respect to the appearance in this country, as following closely upon its appearance in many parts of the Continent, of one of the most terrible epidemics which have been known during this or any other generation. Within a few hours of the appearance of Asiatic cholera at Hamburg, the disease was found to be in existence upon one of the emigrant ships which was moored at Gravesend after coming from that continental port. The extent of the danger in this respect is not, however, to be measured merely by the number of persons who may arrive from ports scheduled as being under this terrible visitation, because it is well-known that the districts from which these unfortunate people are mainly drawn are hotbeds of disease. Typhus and other fevers of the most serious character are practically chronic in those districts; and it is within official knowledge that the condition in which these emigrants for the most part live is filthy and revolting in the extreme. Nor are the conditions under which they live after their arrival in this country such as we can contemplate with equanimity. Their dwellings are of the most foul and loathsome character; they are huddled together in numbers and under conditions which happily do not prevail in these days among the home-born population of this country; and the general hygienic conditions under which they live are such as to render their presence a source of permanent danger to the health of this country....