

[Laws, power, tax and servitude](#) [1]

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One of the least well known British classical liberals was Thomas Hodgskin, who flourished in the early nineteenth century. I have been reading about him in George H Smith's new book, *The System of Liberty*. Something of a precursor to the [Public Choice School](#) [3] thinkers of the twentieth century, Hodgskin critiqued the political process and despaired of getting much liberal change out of it:

Rapidly...as the gentlemen at Westminster work, making three or four hundred laws per year, repeating their tasks session after session ? actively as they multiply restraints, or add patch after patch, they invariably find that the call for their labours is continually renewed. The more they botch and mend, the more numerous are the holes. Knowing nothing of natural principles, they seem to fancy that society...derives its life and strength only from them. They regard it as a baby, whom they must dandle and foster into healthy existence; but while they are scheming how to breed and clothe their pretty fondling ? lo! it has become a giant, whom they can only control as far as he consents to wear their fetters.

But of course the legislators have something with which to buy that consent ? their ability to raise money through taxation and spend it on the noisiest complainers:

One of the first objects then of the law, subordinate to the great principle of preserving its unconstrained dominion over our minds and bodies, is to bestow a sufficient revenue on the government. Who can describe the disgusting servility with which all classes submit to be fleeced by the demands of the tax-gatherer, on all sorts of false pretences...? Who is not acquainted with all the restrictions placed on honest and praiseworthy enterprise...? What pen is equal to the task of accurately describing all the vexations, and the continual misery, heaped on all the industrious classes of the community, under the pretext that it is necessary to raise a revenue for the government?

Thomas Hodgskin, *The Natural and Artificial Right of Property Contrasted* (1832).

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