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The life and works of Richard Cobden [1]

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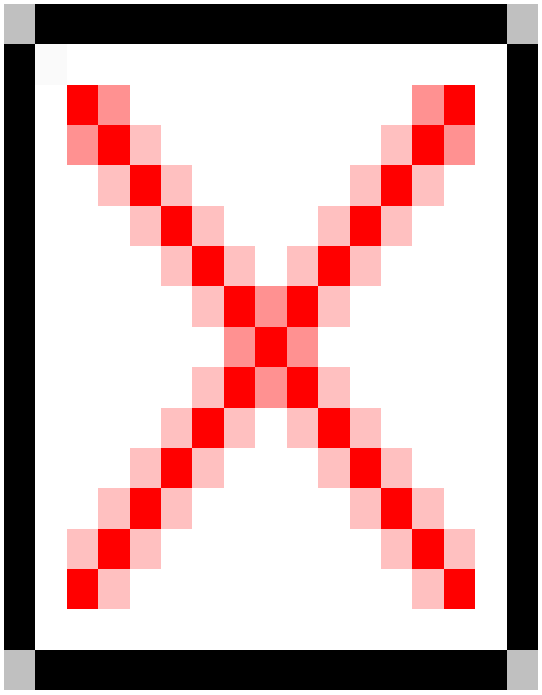

I was at a Liberty Fund colloquium in Edinburgh over the weekend, discussing the life and works of Richard Cobden, the legendary 19th Century promoter of peace and free trade. Although I was already familiar with Cobden's ideas and achievements, I had not read any of his original writings before.

The thing that struck me most was the extent to which Cobden was an activist and campaigner, rather than merely a theorist. His speeches as leader of the Anti-Corn Law League were exceptional, displaying a rare ability to communicate liberal ideas in a way that would appeal to and motivate the audiences he was addressing. More than that, he realized the importance of using the political process to effect change ? the League produced a newspaper, corresponded with voters, encouraged people to join the electoral register, stood candidates and lobbied politicians. With such commitment, it's no wonder his campaign to have the corn laws repealed was a success.

Too often today's classical liberals (or libertarians) have such disdain for government that they are not prepared to engage in politics. Could this be why liberty seems to be doing so badly at the moment? Perhaps we should all take a leaf out of Cobden's book and start fighting a little harder for our ideals.

The other thing that surprised me is how relevant Cobden remains today, whether on foreign policy (where he believed in peaceful non-intervention), labour laws (which he opposed) or a whole host of other issues. He criticized stealth taxes, for instance, arguing that a tax should be as visible and closely linked with the service for which it is required as possible, in order to increase accountability. He also realized, long before Laffer drew his curve, that lowering taxes could boost enterprise and raise revenue. Gordon Brown take note.

You can read more [3] about Cobden on the Globalisation Institute's website ? where it is also possible to

download *The Life of Richard Cobden* [4] by Viscount John Morley.

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