

Letter from WM. MAYRANT, Esq. to one of his Constituents.

STATEBURGH, September 10th, 1816.

Dear Sir,

FINDING that the Bill increasing the compensation of members of Congress has given dissatisfaction to some of my constituents, I will briefly assign the reasons which induced me to vote in favour of that measure, and request that you would, for my satisfaction, and the information of the district I have the honor to represent, make them public.

The limits of a letter will not permit me to answer all the little objections that have been made to that Bill, or to correct the many misrepresentations made on that subject. While some have asserted, that such is the nature of the Bill, that a member, whether he attends or no, receives the \$1500; or if he attends only one day, may draw the whole. Others have said that the members received not only the \$1500 but the six dollars a day besides. As I send you a copy of the Bill, exactly as it was passed and approved of, it can be liable to no misconstruction; and the most common understanding will pronounce the above assertions to be without foundation. Having witnessed the motives of those who brought forward and voted for that measure, and knowing them to be no other than to promote the best interests of their country; that all cupidity and avarice were far removed; it cannot but be to me a matter of much surprize and astonishment that it should be so much clamoured and cried against, as a precedent dangerous and alarming. Had this bill contained any thing inimical to the principles of our government, it would have been execrated; had it been dictated by a little petty avarice, it would have been frowned upon with indignation and contempt. I hope that my fellow citizens in general have a more liberal opinion of the present Congress, than to suffer themselves for a moment to believe that those men, who for many years have directed the councils of our country—who have given the strongest proofs of their attachment to our government—who have conducted her triumphant through the late conflict, and made the most noble and disinterested sacrifices, would now brand their names with infamy, by abusing the power and confidence placed in their hands, to filch from the treasury a paltry sum. But let not the characters of any set of men, however respectable for virtue, patriotism and integrity, screen their acts from the strictest scrutiny and investigation. Let the measure be dispassionately viewed, and I venture to assert, whatever may be the present impressions, when prejudice has given place to calm consideration—when this temporary breeze has subsided, this bill will be looked upon as an act of Legislative authority, having for its end, objects the most fair and just, the good effect of which will soon be experienced.

The old compensation, however adequate it may have been in 1798, when every necessary of life was one hundred and fifty per cent cheaper than at present, had of late years, from a corresponding depreciation of money, become scarcely sufficient, with the strictest economy, to support a single member while attending the session of Congress, without his family or servants, and totally insufficient with any part of his family during that time. The expences at Washington are enormous, more so than in any part of the United States; such as men of moderate circumstances could not stand.

It must be familiar to every one, that on the old compensation men of the first talents, the brightest ornaments of our councils, were continually retiring; who declared the sacrifice of private and domestic pursuits were too great, and they could no longer serve the public. It was a matter of general regret amongst the discerning, that many distinguished members of Congress, as soon as they became useful, were compelled, from the narrowness of their private circumstances, to retire. The manifest tendency of an insufficient compensation, is to give wealth too great a preponderance in our government, by rendering it impossible for men of mediocrity of circumstances to serve without a sacrifice of private fortune; and will operate as an exclusion of that class of men who depend on their individual exertions for the support of themselves and families. Amongst this class of men, the greatest endowments of talents and mental acquirements have always been and ever will be found. Will such men, or will a liberal minded people ask their services, when their individual exertions would be, in a measure, lost to themselves and families, without giving them a compensation adequate to a decent support. You will find few men of virtue and talent, who will gratify their ambition when it must be attended with a sacrifice of domestic comforts and family claims. Only those will do it, who indulge a vicious and inordinate ambition; and to gratify that ambition, to forward their own sinister purposes, will abandon the most sacred tie. Would a people, enthusiastic in the cause of republicanism, and jealous of liberty, wish things so ordered as to favour the views of the wealthy and ambitious, while it suppresses those of virtue and talents, if not favoured with wealth. What would have been thought of the constitution, had it sanctioned a clause excluding all but the wealthy from a seat in congress; would it not have been spurned at with indignation, would not that instrument have established an Aristocracy. And is not the giving an inadequate compensation (when none but the wealthy, or those possessing a considerable share of fortune, can take a seat, or long retain one) silently producing the same effect. The Constitution of United States, purely republican in its principles, has made property no necessary qualification to a seat in Congress, but left the door open to every one. The liberal views of the constitution can only be seconded by offering to members such a compensation as will induce men to serve, without regard to their own private fortune. When a man accepts a seat in Congress, his own private pursuits must be, in a great measure abandoned, and particularly with professional characters.

It should be the object of every government to ensure to itself the aid and operation of virtue and talents: And how can this be done, when the individual who is to serve knows, unless he possesses the advantages of fortune, he must sacrifice his own private pursuits, on which his happiness and comfort depends. A change of circumstances and increase of expences rendered an increase of pay necessary; and who was to make that increase but the members themselves? It was an act of Legislative authority, delegated to them by the people of the United States; and in the exercise of which, members felt all the delicacy of their situation. They knew the responsibility they were to incur, they were actuated by the most upright views: Unless sufficient compensation is allowed to the members, such as will induce men in mediocrity of circumstances to make some sacrifice of private pursuits, to attend public affairs, the talent of the nation will not be commanded on your Congressional floor. What man of virtue, whose private welfare depends, in a great measure, on his individual exertion, will wish to go to Congress, or long retain a seat, where he must be absent from home and his family, six or seven months and sometimes nine months in the year, and receive what, during that time, only will, with economy, support himself. Upon the most accurate calculation, the increase of pay is not more than about \$500, or about 38 per cent on the old compensation, averaging the length of the sessions for ten years past; and not more than a cent and not quite a half to each person represented. Do all the peoples sensibilities lay in their purse? Will touching that to the potent tune of a cent and a half, induce them to charge such men as CALHOUN, CLAY, JOHNSON of Kentucky, and many other worthies with corruption? Can it be supposed that men like those who were to you, during your late conflict single handed with the greatest nation of the earth, the nation that seemed to rule the destinies of the civilized world, as a pillar of cloud in the day to lead you, and as a pillar of fire in the night to give you light, were actuated by paltry selfish passions? CALHOUN, the pride and ornament of our state; the youthful statesman, before the thunder of whose manly eloquence and close reasoning the sophisms of opposition sunk.—CLAY, the able, eloquent, animated statesman and negotiator; the admiration of our country and of Europe.—JOHNSON, the valuable, useful, indefatigable member of your councils; the devoted patriot, who might have shielded himself in a dignified station on the floor of Congress where he was, but chose rather to encounter (his bleeding country's calls) the keen and piercing embraces of the Indian tomahawk, and unerring rifle: whose body has been riddled in your service; whose blood crimsoned the plains where Proctor's cruel sanguinary sceptre and Tecumseh's savage bow was broke. Yes, I say, can they for a moment suppose that such men as those, were actuated by cupidity? by a petty paltry avarice? Forbid it justice! forbid it patriotic gratitude! They cannot, will not think so. The present compensation is not, in reality more, nor as much as six dollars a day was in '89, the time when the old compensation was past, estimating the rise which has since taken place in every necessary of life, and the depreciation of money—to have made any increase at all it could not well have been made less. I know it may be said we always have had men enough willing to serve for six dollars a day;

and there would be found enough who would gladly serve for nothing, and pay their own expences. But did not some of the best members retire, who declared that living at Washington was too expensive; their private estates were injured too much; their pay did not support their necessary expences, and surely a change in circumstances would justify an increase of pay. It is only of late years that the former compensation had become so greatly inadequate. When I gave the vote, I took not my own case into consideration. It was my Country? It was to preserve our government from verging to an ARISTOCRACY? For if an adequate compensation be not allowed, it is out of the power of men, in a mediocrity of circumstances to serve. Exclude such men from your Congressional floor, and what a galaxy of talent would you deprive yourself of? what would be lost to the nation. Many have objected to a fixed sum instead of a per diem; saying that a fixed sum would induce members to hurry over, in a short time, the Session; and leave the business unfinished. Let those who urge this objection reflect, that the same want of public virtue; of common honesty; the same depraved disposition which would drive men to so improper an act, would induce them to procrastinate the Sessions if there was an ample per diem.

The British parliament now receive no compensation.—The democratic part of their constitution has become a mere cypher, and the members a servile set, who just echo the royal will and pleasure. The most of them are pensioners and place men, the rest office hunters. It is not uncommon there, for a man of wealth to purchase, at an immense price, a seat in Parliament; and then barter away the dearest rights of their constituents at the footstool of Royalty. A good effect of the Bill will be to render members less liable to executive influence. A man must be easy in his circumstances, to be perfectly independant. Give him a compensation not adequate to support him decently, while at Washington in your service, his cramped situation may induce him to yield his own independant opinions to Executive will, for a profitable office; and then say, like Shakespear's poor starved apothecary, "my poverty but not my will consents." The operation of the bill would have been postponed to a future Congress, but for the Senate who held their seats for six years; and had it been delayed until an entire new election of members had taken place it must have been postponed for six years. Prior to the adoption of the new constitution, each State paid its own members. Our State then (if I recollect right, and I am sure I do) allowed its members, or delegates to the old Congress, six hundred pounds sterling per annum. The Legislature then thought they ought to be put upon a footing with the Judges; that they held a station full as laborious and important to our national welfare. Could I believe on considering the above that my vote for making an increase of about \$500 to the old compensation would give dissatisfaction to my constituents? No one contends that the members should be supported extravagantly but certainly what will support decently.

Suppose I had chose to have played the hypocrite. I might have absented myself from the House on the day the Bill passed, or voted against it, still it would have been carried, but I disdained to do so. I thought the measure a correct one, and shrunk not from the responsibility attached to the vote. I will now make a statement, which will contradict what has been generally said, through the district, by persons who ought to have known better; that the members received from twenty to twenty-five dollars per day; to take the length of the Sessions, for ten year past, it would not be more than nine dollars per day, or an increase of 38 per cent on the old compensation. I will make my calculations for the present Congress, taking their two Sessions, and this Congress has and will be in session, a less time than the sessions have averaged for ten years past; the last Session commenced the 4th Dec. and ended the last day of April, say 149 days.

FIRST SESSION.

Served in Dec. 28 days.
in Jan. 31
in Feb. 29
in March 31
in April 30

149
93

SECOND SESSION.

(will commence 2d. Dec. and close 4th. March)

To serve in Dec. 30 days.
Jan. 31
Feb. 28
March 4

93

242 days the present congress will be in session.

Compensation for two years, \$3000 divided by 242 will give \$12 33 per day—or take another calculation. I live 510 miles from Washington, it will take 20 days to get there, allowing for bad weather, &c. I will be on the road 80 days for both Sessions, added to 242

80

322 days in public service.

Compensation for two years, \$3000 travelling expences for both sessions \$606 divided by 322 gives \$1 19 cents per day. Should there be an extra session, the members receive not one cent additional compensation.

I have now given you as fair and as accurate a statement as I am able to make, which you will find correct, and have lengthened this letter much beyond what I intended. Should my fellow citizens, upon mature consideration, think it best to give their suffrages to another, I am content. May he be one of more talent, more experience, more knowledge of the true interest and policy of our nation—More zeal and devotion for the public good he cannot have. I left the walks of private life, not to serve myself, but my country. I shall be a candidate again, confident that I served faithfully, and will do so again if elected.

I remain your fellow citizen.

WM. MAYRANT.

AN ACT.

To change the mode of compensation to the Members of the Senate and House of Representatives, and the Delegates from the Territories.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That instead of the daily compensation now allowed by law, there shall be paid annually to the Senators,

Representatives and Delegates from Territories of this and every future Congress of the United States, the following sums respectively: that is to say, to the President of the Senate pro tempore, when there is no Vice-President, and to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, three thousand dollars each; to each Senator, Member of the House of Representatives, other than the Speaker and Delegate, the sum of fifteen hundred dollars: Provided, nevertheless, That in case any Senator, Representative or Delegate, shall not attend in his place at the day on which Congress shall convene, or shall absent himself before the close of the session, a deduction shall be made from the sum which would otherwise be allowed to him, in proportion to the time of his absence, saving to the cases of sickness, the same provisions as are established by the existing laws. And the aforesaid allowance shall be certified and paid in the same manner as the daily compensation to Members of Congress has heretofore been.

H. CLAY,

Speaker of the House of Representatives.

JOHN GAILLARD,

President of the Senate pro tempore.

March 9, 1816.—Approved,

JAMES MADISON.