**The grain plan**

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In 1846, imperial Britain removed the restrictions that had until then protected British wheat and grain from foreign competition and allowed domestic producers to keep prices high. The Corn Laws were a series of regulations that imposed tariffs and restrictions on the import of grain. There was a prohibition on the import of corn below a certain price. The demand for such laws arose among influential landowners against the backdrop of falling prices as peace ensued after the end of Napoleonic wars.

Since the powerful landowners were well represented in Parliament, it was easy to obtain the State’s approval for the laws. The system was pivotal to the interests of the landed gentry but went against the demand of the general public for cheaper food. Moreover, the laws also debilitated against Britain’s mushrooming manufacturing industry that needed a liberal trade regime for growth and expansion. The repeal of these laws came about as a result of shifting political dynamics and pressing domestic needs.

[Italy's Jacobs sprints to shock gold in Olympics 100-meter dash](https://nation.com.pk/01-Aug-2021/italy-s-jacobs-sprints-to-shock-gold-in-olympics-100-meter-dash)

The Anti-Corn Law League provided a platform to raise a voice against trade barriers. Contemporary economists also supported free trade contentions. As the Irish potato famine broke out in 1845, pressure to reduce prices of food also increased. In 1846, parliament buried the Corn Laws with a majority vote. The decision was as shocking and perplexing for many then as it is today. That a government which had been elected in 1841 on the mandate to protect agriculture and the parliament which largely represented the interests of the landed aristocracy would snatch away the protection that landowners so earnestly wanted puzzled many observers.

Whether it was the League’s agitation, pressure from the manufacturing industry and vested interests of officials associated with it, ideological inclination toward free trade or political expediency in the face of high prices and famine (or all of these), by 1846 a critical mass had been achieved that triggered the decision to repeal the Corn Laws. The repeal of Corn Laws is often regarded as the shift from mercantilism to free trade. Britain opened the doors of its markets to cheaper products. Yet, the debate over the fundamental question regarding government policy on trade lingers on.

[Fire burning forest in Greece’s Achaia region](https://nation.com.pk/01-Aug-2021/fire-burning-forest-in-greece-s-achaia-region)

Is free trade essential for economic growth? Or artificial barriers in the form of tariffs and other restrictions imperative to protect local industries? Trade policy is an outcome of various factors. States have sometimes favoured free trade and at times opted for restrictive, protectionist policies. The period during which the Corn Laws were abolished also witnessed Britain’s rapid industrialisation. Since the UK was expanding its manufacturing base and growing a stronger economy, it gained immensely from the repeal of these laws.

But it is important to understand that the process of industrialisation was also supported by Britain’s policy of brutally crushing competition, especially from colonies under British control. “In order to benefit the cotton merchants and the cotton spinners and weavers of Lancashire, India, in effect had to be de-industrialised.”, Denis Judd wrote in his book. British assault on the Indian cotton industry lacked any mercy. Thus, it was not just free trade but also the colonies’ impoverishment that was used to fill up coffers of imperial Britain.

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The rules of trade in general are dictated by powerful states. And they follow them when necessary, and bend or break them when expedient. Within these countries, it is often the powerful groups with a strong interest in economic policies that pull the strings. And it is often these groups that lobby for certain kinds of trade regulations that suit their interests. Thus, whether a country would follow protectionism or free trade is often determined by interest groups. They not only lobby decision-makers but also try to sway public opinion. Brexit is a recent example of how various groups tried to (mis)lead the public through fiery speeches and emotional content for/against the exit from the EU.

It is therefore important to understand the political economy of development. Policies are not carved in a vacuum. And even if they do not protect the interests of the general public, they do often tend to take care of those in the driving seat of public affairs. The Corn Laws were a classical example of economic policymaking being dominated by elite groups. Despite the benefits that could have accrued to the public by virtue of low food prices, Britain thought it otherwise and pandered to the demand of local producers for protective tariffs and restrictions on imports.

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Today, capitalist czars have replaced landowners in most countries. Economic policymaking is now shaped by them. Corn laws of our times have taken a more subtle form as financial and trade instruments have become more complex. So great is the power of the financial giants that even the backlash resulting from the financial recession of 2008 could not rein them in.

Whether free trade continues as it is or we will revert to a protectionist era as being reflected in the US-China trade war will depend on the needs of global capitalists and whether they are able to sustain the strong resurging wave of public resentment against their perceived excesses.