

## Thomas More's Petition for Free Speech

(Made to King Henry VIII, as Speaker of the House of Commons, April 1523)

In the fourteenth year of His Grace's reign was there a Parliament holden, whereof Sir Thomas More was chosen Speaker; who, being very loath to take that room upon him, made an oration (not now extant) to the King's Highness for his discharge thereof; whereunto when the King would not consent, he spake unto His Grace in form following:

Since I perceive, most redoubted Sovereign, that it standeth not with your high pleasure to reform this election and cause it to be changed, but have by the mouth of the most reverend father in God, the Legate, your Highness's Chancellor, thereunto given your most royal assent, and have of your benignity determined, far above that I may bear, to enable me and for this office to repute me meet, rather than you should seem to impute unto your Commons that they have unmeetly chosen, I am therefore, and always shall be, ready obediently to conform myself to the accomplishment of your high commandment, in my most humble wise beseeching your most noble Majesty that I may with your Grace's favor, before I farther enter thereunto, make mine humble intercession unto your Highness for two lowly petitions: The one privately concerning myself, the other the whole assembly of your Common House.

For myself, gracious Sovereign, that if it mishap me in anything hereafter that is on the behalf of your Commons in your high presence to be declared, to mistake my message, and in the lack of good utterance, by my misrehearsal, to pervert or impair their prudent instructions, it may then like your most noble Majesty, of your abundant grace, with the eye of your accustomed pity, to pardon my simpleness, giving me leave to repair again to the Common House, and there to confer with them, and to take their substantial advice what thing and in what wise I shall on their behalf utter and speak before your noble Grace, to the intent their prudent devices and affairs be not by my simpleness and folly hindered or impaired, which thing, if it should so mishap, as it were well likely to mishap in me, if your gracious benignity relieved not my oversight, it could not fail to be during my life a perpetual grudge and heaviness to my heart, the help and remedy whereof, in manner aforesaid remembered, is, most gracious Sovereign, my first lowly suit and humble petition unto your most noble Grace.

Mine other humble request, most excellent Prince, is this: Forasmuch as there be of your Commons, here by your high commandment assembled for your Parliament, a great number which are, after the accustomed manner, appointed in the Common House to treat and advise of the common affairs among themselves apart, and albeit, most dear liege Lord, that according to your prudent advice, by your honorable writs everywhere declared, there hath been as due diligence used in sending up to your Highness's Court of Parliament the most discreet persons out of every quarter that men could esteem meet thereunto, whereby it is not to be doubted but that there is a very substantial assembly of right wise and politic persons, yet, most victorious Prince, since among so many wise men neither is every man wise alike, nor among so many men, like well witted, every man like well spoken, and it often happeneth that, likewise as much folly is uttered with painted polished speech, so many, boisterous and rude in language, see deep indeed, and give right substantial counsel, and since also in matters of great importance, the mind

is often so occupied in the matter that a man rather studieth what to say than how, by reason whereof the wisest man and the best spoken in a whole country fortuneth among<sup>4</sup>, while his mind is fervent in the matter, somewhat to speak in such wise as he would afterward wish to have been uttered otherwise, and yet no worse will had when he spake it, than he hath when he would so gladly change it, therefore, most gracious Sovereign, considering that in your High Court of Parliament is nothing entreated but matter of weight and importance concerning your Realm and your own royal estate, it could not fail to let<sup>7</sup> and put to silence from the giving of their advice and counsel many of your discreet Commons, to the great hindrance of the common affairs, except that every of your Commons were utterly discharged of all doubt and fear how anything that it should happen them to speak, should happen of your Highness to be taken. And in this point, though your well known and proved benignity putteth every man in right good hope, yet such is the weight of the matter, such is the reverend dread that the timorous hearts of your natural subjects conceive toward your High Majesty, our most redoubted King and undoubted Sovereign, that they cannot in this point find themselves satisfied, except your gracious bounty therein declared put away the scruple of their timorous minds, and animate and encourage them, and put them out of doubt. It may therefore like your most abundant Grace, our most benign and godly King, to give to all your Commons here assembled your most gracious licence and pardon, freely, without doubt of your dreadful displeasure, every man to discharge his conscience, and boldly in everything incident among us to declare his advice, and whatsoever happen any man to say, that it may like your Noble Majesty, or your inestimable goodness, to take all in good part, interpreting every man's words, how uncunningly soever they be couched, to proceed yet of good zeal towards the profit of your realm and honor of your royal person, the prosperous estate and preservation whereof, most excellent Sovereign, is the thing which we all, your most humble loving subjects, according to the most bounden duty of our natural allegiance, most highly desire and pray for.

<sup>1</sup> This speech is recorded in William Roper's *Life of Thomas More*. This text is based upon E. V. Hitchcock's edition, Oxford UP, 1935.

<sup>2</sup> See Hall's *Chronicle* or Harpsfield's *Life of Thomas More* for summaries of this speech.

<sup>3</sup> More had asked to be discharged, i.e., relieved, from the obligation to be Speaker of the House of Commons.

<sup>4</sup> "to repute me meet": declare me qualified

<sup>5</sup> "devices": opinions

<sup>6</sup> "fortuneth among": now and then

<sup>7</sup> "let": hinder