

# Minimum Wage Regulation Bill and the Political Arithmetic, 1795-1796 : Controversy between Samuel Whitbread and William Pitt, and John Howlett

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During the famine of 1795, Samuel Whitbread proposed a bill which would have enabled the justice of the peace to set a minimum wage for labourers in husbandry. In February 1796, William Pitt criticised the bill and forced its rejection. Although both of them referred to estimation by Richard Price, who had identified a decline in real wages over the century, their perceptions of the conditions of husbandry were opposite. Whitbread regarded the wage level of husbandry labourers to be permanently relegated to less than necessary for even minimal comfort, and he proposed the bill above to secure the means of adequate support for those people. Pitt argued that wages should rely upon the market mechanism and criticised Whitbread's bill as an encouragement of idleness among the poor. Pitt's only proposal was to amend the poor laws in order to promote mutual

support, in the mode of friendly society.

In 1781, John Howlett examined Price's claims regarding the decrease of population since the Glorious Revolution. Adopting the same method of political arithmetic as Price's, his results showed an increase of population in the same period. In 1796, he published a pamphlet attacking Pitt. Howlett interpreted Whitbread's bill as a means to dissolve the union of employers, which would have resulted in the same circumstances experienced by employees whose union was prohibited by an act of 1768. In opposition to Pitt, who believed in relying on the market mechanism, Howlett promoted the symmetric structure of the labor market by the method of legislation.

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