

Reflections on the Revolution in France

Edmund Burke

1790

Copyright © Jonathan Bennett 2017. All rights reserved

[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type.—The division into Parts is not in the original, and is purely for ease of management on this website.—The section-headings are not in the original. Each marks the start of a new topic but not necessarily the end of the preceding one.—This work was written in 1790, three years before the executions of the French king and queen and the ‘reign of terror’ that followed.—In the last paragraph of this work Burke says that his life has been mainly ‘a struggle for the liberty of others’. So it was. His opposition to the French revolution was one of the four main political battles in his life, the other three being support for the American colonists, for the Irish, and for the people of India (see page 25).

First launched: April 2016

Contents

Why this work has the form of a letter	1
Part 1	1
The Revolution Society	1
Price's sermon	5
The first claimed right: to choose our own rulers	8
A small and temporary deviation	9
Divine right of kings	13
The second claimed right: to dismiss kings for misconduct	14
Kings as servants of the people	15
The third claimed right: to form a government for ourselves	16
Our liberties as an inheritance	17
How France missed its opportunity	19
The harm the French revolution has done	20
The Third Estate: common people	22
The British House of Commons	24
The First Estate: the clergy	25
The Second Estate: the nobility	26
The importance of property	27
Dismembering a country	29
How the Revolution Society views the British constitution	31
'The rights of men'	32
The empirical science of government	34
National sickness	35
Back to Price	36
The conduct of the French National Assembly	38
The situation of the French king	39
'Hang the bishops!'	40
The treatment of the French queen	41
The age of chivalry is gone	42
The loss of our compass	43

Part 2	45
Corrupt head versus natural heart	45
'An arbitrary monarch'	46
Speaking on behalf of England	47
In defence of prejudices	48
If anyone tried to push England France's way...	49
Religion as the basis of civil society	50
An established church	51
Caution in amending the state	53
Society as a contract	54
English attitudes	55
The confiscators	59
Old nobility versus new money	60
Political men of letters	62
Confiscation	63
The effects of confiscation	67
What is wrong with absolute democracy	69
The faults of the French monarchy	69
Population	70
National wealth	71
What is wrong with the French nobility?	74
What is wrong with the French clergy?	77
What we can learn from history	77
Again: how bad were the French clergy?	79
Abolishing Christianity	81
Two kinds of tolerance	82
Confiscation again	82
Justice and public benefit	85
The estates of monasteries	87
The church's landed estates	89
Part 3	90
The incompetence of the National Assembly	90
Learning from difficulties	91

Reform	92
(i) The constitution of the legislature	95
Wealth and representation	97
Treating France like a conquered country	99
Consequences of the fragmenting of France	101
Cement 1: paper money	103
A nation of gamblers	105
Cement 2: the power of Paris	106
(ii) Forming an executive power	108
The abolition of the <i>parlements</i>	112
(iii) The judicature	113
(iv) The army	114
Control of the army	118
Coercing the peasants	120
(v) The revolution's handling of revenue	123
The salt monopoly	124
Other revenue attempts	124
Obtaining credit	126
The cost of maintaining Paris	130
Conclusion	131

Glossary

artificial: Resulting from human intelligence and skill. Antonym of 'natural'; not in the least dyslogistic.

assignat: 'Promissory note issued by the revolutionary government of France on the security of State lands'. (OED)

bull: papal edict. Burke's application of this term to Price's sermon is one of several mocking indications that he thinks Price is pontificating like a Pope, an 'archpontiff'.

cabal: Small plotting group.

description: This used to have as one of its meanings 'kind' or 'type' or 'class', and in Burke's usage it usually means 'kind (etc.) of men'. For example, on page 19: 'the various descriptions of which your community was composed'.

dissenter: Adherent of a protestant denomination other than the Church of England.

emolument: Income by virtue of work or position; salary.

entailed inheritance: Inheritance of property that passes down the family line and is forbidden by law to go anywhere else.

estate: see **states**.

job: 'A public service or position of trust turned to private or party advantage' (OED).

levity: Unseriousness.

manly: Upright.

meretricious: Glittery and cheaply decorative (from Latin *meretrix* = 'prostitute').

mess-john: Scottish slang term for 'priest'.

Old Jewry: A street in central London. The meeting-house in it for dissenters was famous.

orders: see **states**.

parlements: Courts of justice and tribunals.

pecuniary: Having to do with money.

popular: Here it means 'of the people', and doesn't imply 'liked by the people'.

positive law: Man-made law (in contrast with natural law). Similarly (on pages 11–12) 'positive authority', 'positive institution'.

prejudice: A preconceived or long-held opinion, not necessarily concerning race, sex, etc.

prescription: The legal doctrine that something's being in effect for long enough eventually creates a *right* to it—e.g. a public path through private land. Burke's concern here is with prescription as a basis of ownership—e.g. a family that has had the use and control of a landed estate for centuries thereby *owns* it—and as a basis for the legitimacy of a government, something that 'through long usage mellows into legality governments that started in violence' (page 90).

prince: As was common in his day, Burke often uses 'prince' to mean 'monarch'.

principle: On pages 4, 26, 28, and a number of other places Burke uses this word in a now-obsolete sense in which it means 'source', 'cause', 'driver', 'energiser', or the like.

revolution: When Burke speaks of 'our revolution' or 'the glorious revolution' he is referring to the events of 1688 in which James II was replaced by the Dutch William and

Mary of Orange as joint sovereigns of England. (William was invited in by many powerful people; he came with an army, but had no need to use it.) Before William and Mary were crowned, arrangements and agreements were made which had the effect of establishing a *constitutional monarchy*.

sentiment: This can mean 'feeling' or 'belief', and when certain early modern writers speak of 'moral sentiments' they may mean both at once, or be exploiting the word's ambiguity. On page 42 Burke speaks of 'a mixture of opinion and sentiment', which clearly treats sentiment as feeling.

sophistry: Tricky and deceptive logic.

states: The three segments of the French nation: the clergy,

the nobility, and the common people. Burke also calls them 'estates' and 'orders'.

States-General: A French advisory parliament in three assemblies for the three 'states' of the French nation (see preceding entry). As the Revolution developed, the three were merged into one, the National Assembly, and went from being merely advisory to having legislative and executive power.

Third Estate: The 'common people' part of the States-General.

tolerable: reasonable, allowable, fairly acceptable.

Part 3

This letter has grown to a great length, though it is short in relation to the infinite extent of the subject. Various occupations have from time to time called my mind from the subject. I was not sorry to give myself leisure to observe whether I might find in the National Assembly's proceedings reasons to change or to qualify some of my first sentiments. Everything has confirmed me more strongly in my first opinions. It was my original purpose to survey the principles of the National Assembly with regard to the great and fundamental establishments, and to compare the whole of what you have substituted in the place of what you have destroyed with the corresponding items in our British constitution [see page 51]. But this plan is of a greater extent than I at first calculated, and I find that you have little desire to learn from any examples. At present I must content myself with some remarks on your establishments, reserving for another time what I proposed to say about the spirit of our British monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. . . .

The incompetence of the National Assembly

I have taken a view of what has been done by the governing power in France. I have certainly spoken of it with freedom. Those whose principle it is to despise the ancient, permanent sense of mankind and to set up a scheme of society on new principles must naturally expect that such of us who think better of the human race's judgment than of theirs should consider both them and their devices as men and schemes upon their trial. They must take it for granted that we attend much to their reason but not at all to their authority. They have not one of the great influencing prejudices of mankind

in their favour. They avow their hostility to *opinion*. Of course they must expect no support from that influence which they have deposed from the seat of its jurisdiction, along with every other authority.

I can never regard this Assembly as anything but a voluntary association of men who have availed themselves of circumstances to seize the power of the state. They do not have the sanction and authority of the character under which they first met. They have assumed another very different character and have completely altered and inverted all the relations in which they originally stood. The authority they exercise is not backed by any constitutional law of the state. They have departed from the instructions of the people by whom they were sent, though those instructions were the sole source of their authority because the Assembly did not act in virtue of any ancient usage or settled law. Their most considerable acts have not been done by great majorities; and in this sort of near divisions, which carry only the notional authority of the whole, strangers will consider reasons as well as resolutions.

If they had set up this new experimental government as a necessary substitute for an expelled tyranny, mankind would look ahead to the time of prescription [see Glossary] which through long usage mellows into legality governments that started in violence. All those whose feelings lead them to the conservation of civil order would recognise as legitimate, even in its cradle, the child produced by that force of *necessity* to which all just governments owe their birth, and on which they justify their continuance. But they will be slow and reluctant in giving any sort of acceptance to the operations of a power that derived its birth from no law and no necessity,

but which on the contrary had its origin in the vices and sinister practices by which the social union is often disturbed and sometimes destroyed. This Assembly has hardly a year's prescription. We have their own word for it that they have made a revolution. To make a revolution is a measure which, on the face of it, requires an apology [here = 'a justification']. To make a revolution is to subvert the previous state of our country, and extraordinary reasons are called for to justify such a violent proceeding. The sense of mankind authorises us to examine the mode of acquiring new power, and to criticise the use that is made of it, with less awe and reverence than is usually conceded to a settled and recognised authority.

In •obtaining and •securing their power the Assembly proceeds on principles the most opposite to those that appear to direct them in the •use of it. An observation on this difference will let us into the true spirit of their conduct. Everything they have done or still do to obtain and keep their power is by the most common arts. They proceed exactly as their ancestors of ambition have done before them.—Trace them through all their artifices, frauds, and violences and you'll find nothing that is new. They follow precedents and examples with the punctilious exactness of an advocate in a law-court. They never depart an iota from the authentic formulas of tyranny and usurpation. But their spirit in all the regulations concerning the public good has been the very reverse of this. *There* they commit the whole •populace• to the mercy of untested speculations; they abandon the public's dearest interests to loose theories that none of them would trust the slightest of his private concerns to. Why this difference? Well, in obtaining and securing power they travel in the beaten road because they are thoroughly in earnest about that. They abandon the public interests wholly to chance because they do not really care about them. I say

'to chance' because there is no empirical evidence that their schemes are likely to be beneficial.

We must always see with a pity not unmixed with respect the errors of those who are timid and doubtful of themselves in matters concerning the happiness of mankind. But in these gentlemen there is nothing of the tender, parental solicitude that fears to cut up the infant for the sake of an experiment. In the vastness of their promises and the confidence of their predictions, they far outdo all the boasting of hucksters selling fake medicine. The arrogance of their claims provokes and challenges us to inquire into their foundation.

Learning from difficulties

I am convinced that there are men of considerable ability among the popular leaders in the National Assembly. Some of them display eloquence in their speeches and their writings, which is not possible without powerful and cultivated talents. But eloquence can exist without a corresponding degree of wisdom. When I speak of ability, I have to distinguish. What they have done toward the support of their system indicates that they are no ordinary men. In the system itself, taken as the plan for a republic constructed for procuring the prosperity and security of the citizen and for promoting the strength and grandeur of the state, I cannot find *anything* that displays in a single instance the work of a comprehensive and organising mind or even the provisions of mere everyday prudence. Their purpose everywhere seems to have been to evade and slip aside from difficulty. It has been the glory of the great masters in all the arts [here includes the sciences] to confront difficulties and overcome them; and when they had overcome the first difficulty, to turn it into an instrument for new conquests over new difficulties, thus

enabling them to extend the scope of their science and even to push forward, beyond the reach of their original thoughts, the landmarks of the human understanding itself. Difficulty is a severe instructor, set over us by the supreme ordinance of a parental Guardian and Legislator who knows us better than we know ourselves, as he loves us better too. ‘The Father himself did not want the ploughman’s way to be easy’ [quoted in Latin from Virgil]. He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper. This amicable conflict with difficulty obliges us to an intimate acquaintance with our object and compels us to consider it in all its relations. It will not allow us to be superficial. It is the lack of nerves of understanding for such a task—the degenerate fondness for tricking shortcuts and little fallacious facilities—that has created governments with arbitrary powers in so many parts of the world.

They have created the recent arbitrary monarchy of France. They have created the arbitrary republic of Paris. With them defects in wisdom are to be made up for by an abundance of force. They get nothing by it. Commencing their labours on a principle of sloth, they have the common fortune of slothful men. The difficulties that they had dodged rather than escaped meet them again down the road; they multiply and thicken on them; they are involved, through a labyrinth of confused detail, in an industry without limit and without direction; and eventually the whole of their work becomes feeble, vicious, and insecure.

This inability to wrestle with difficulty is what has obliged the arbitrary Assembly of France to commence their schemes of reform with abolition and total destruction. But is it in destroying and pulling down that skill is displayed? Your mob can do this as well at least as your assemblies. The shallowest understanding, the roughest hand, is more than equal to that task. Rage and frenzy will pull down more in

half an hour than prudence, deliberation, and foresight can build up in a hundred years.

The errors and defects of old establishments are visible and palpable. It calls for little ability to point them out; and where absolute power is given, it requires only a word to *abolish* the vice and the establishment together. The same lazy but restless disposition which loves sloth and hates quiet directs the politicians when they come to work on filling the place of what they have destroyed. To make everything the reverse of what they have seen is—so they think—quite as easy as to destroy. No difficulties occur in what has never been tried. Criticism is almost baffled in discovering the defects of what has not existed; and eager enthusiasm and cheating hope have all the wide field of imagination in which they can hold forth with little or no opposition.

Reform

Reforming something while keeping it in existence is quite another thing. When the useful parts of an old establishment are kept, and what is added is to be fitted to what is retained, this requires the use of

- a vigorous mind,
- steady, persevering attention,
- various powers of comparison and combination, and
- the resources of an understanding fruitful in expedients;

these are to be exercised in a continued conflict with the combined force of two opposite vices, •the obstinacy that rejects all improvement and •the levity [see Glossary] that is fatigued and disgusted with everything it has. You may object:

‘A process of this kind is slow. It is not fit for an assembly that glories in performing in a few months

the work of ages. Such a mode of reforming ·as you recommend· might take up many years.'

Without question it might; and it ought. When a method has time as one of its assistants, one of its *excellences* is that its operation is slow and in some cases almost imperceptible. If circumspection and caution are a part of wisdom when we work on inanimate matter, surely they become a part of duty also when the subject of our demolition and construction is not brick and timber but multitudes of sentient beings who may be rendered miserable by the sudden alteration of their state, condition, and habits. But it seems as if the prevalent opinion in Paris is that the sole qualifications for a perfect legislator are an unfeeling heart and an undoubting confidence. My ideas of that high office are far different. The true lawgiver ought to have a heart full of sensibility. He ought to love and respect his kind, and to fear himself. It may be allowed to his temperament to catch his final goal with an intuitive glance, but his movements toward it ought to be deliberate. Political arrangement, being a work for social ends, is to be done only by social means. In it, mind must conspire with mind. Time is required to produce the union of minds required to produce all the good we aim at. Our patience will achieve more than our force. If I might venture to appeal to something that is so much out of fashion in Paris, I mean to *experience*, I should tell you that in the course of my life I have known and (to the best of my ability) co-operated with great men; and I have never yet seen any plan that has not been mended by the observation of people who were much inferior in understanding to the person who took the lead in the business. By a slow but well-sustained progress the effect of each step is watched; the good or ill success of the first step throws light on the second; and so, from light to light, we are safely conducted through the whole series. We see that the parts of the

system do not clash. The evils latent in the most promising contrivances are provided for as they arise. One advantage is as little as possible sacrificed to another. We compensate, we reconcile, we balance. We are enabled to unite into a consistent whole the various anomalies and contending principles that are found in the minds and affairs of men. What arises from this is not excellence in simplicity but something far superior, excellence in composition. Where the great interests of mankind are concerned through a long series of generations, that series ought to be admitted into some share in the councils that are going to affect them so deeply. It's not merely that justice requires this; the work itself requires the aid of more minds than one age can provide. It is from this view of things that the best legislators have been often satisfied with the establishment of some sure, solid, and ruling principle [see Glossary] in government—a power like the one that some philosophers have called a 'plastic nature'—and having fixed the principle they have then left it to its own operation.

To proceed in this way, i.e. with a presiding principle and a prolific energy, is for me the criterion of profound wisdom. What your politicians take to be the marks of a bold, hardy genius are only proofs of a deplorable lack of ability. By their violent haste and their defiance of the process of nature, they are delivered over blindly to every projector and adventurer, to every alchemist and quack. They despair of turning to account anything that is common, such as the place of *diet* in preserving health. The worst of it is that their despair of curing common illnesses by regular methods arises not only from •defect of comprehension but also (I fear) from •malignity of disposition. Your legislators seem to have taken their opinions of all professions, ranks, and offices from the declamations and buffooneries of satirists; who would themselves be astonished if they were held to the letter of

their own descriptions. By listening only to these, your leaders regard all things only on the side of their vices and faults, and view those vices and faults under every colour of exaggeration. It may seem paradoxical but is undoubtedly true that

in general those who are habitually employed in finding and displaying faults are unqualified for the work of reform, because not only are their minds not furnished with patterns of the fair and good, but by habit they come to take no delight in the contemplation of such things.

By hating vices too much they come to love men too little. So it is no wonder that they should be indisposed to serve them and unable to do so. From this arises the disposition of some of your guides to pull everything in pieces. At this malicious game they display the whole of their four-handed activity. As for the others, the paradoxes that eloquent writers have brought forth purely as a sport of fancy to try their talents, to attract attention and excite surprise, are taken up by these gentlemen not

- in the spirit of the original authors, as means of cultivating their taste and improving their style, but
- as serious grounds of action on the basis of which they proceed in regulating the most important concerns of the state.

Cicero has fun describing Cato as trying to act in the commonwealth on the basis of school paradoxes that exercised the wits of the junior students in the Stoic philosophy. If this was true of Cato, these gentlemen copy him in the manner of some of his contemporaries. [Burke here throws in a three-word Latin phrase, which points to a passage in which Horace mocked people who thought they could match Cato by going barefoot and wearing a tattered toga.] Mr Hume told me that he had from Rousseau himself the secret of his principles of composition. That acute

though eccentric observer had perceived that to strike and interest the public something marvellous must be produced; that the marvellous of the heathen mythology had long since lost its effect; that the giants, magicians, fairies, and heroes of romance which followed had exhausted the portion of credulity that belonged to their age; that now nothing was left to the writer but that kind of marvel that might still be produced, and with as great an effect as ever, though in another way—namely the marvellous in life, in manners, in characters, and in extraordinary situations, giving rise to new and unlooked-for strokes in politics and morals. I believe that if Rousseau were alive and in one of his lucid intervals, he would be shocked at the practical frenzy of his scholars, who in their paradoxes are servile imitators, and even in their incredulity reveal an implicit faith.

Men who undertake considerable things, even in a regular way, ought to give us reason to think they are able. But the physician of the state who undertakes not only to cure illnesses but to regenerate constitutions ought to show uncommon powers. Some very unusual appearances of wisdom ought to display themselves on the face of the designs of those who make no appeal to past practice and do not copy any model. Has any such been manifested? I shall survey what the Assembly has done with regard **(i)** to the constitution of the legislature, **(ii)** to that of the executive power, **(iii)** to that of the judicature, **(iv)** to the model of the army, and finally **(v)** to the system of finance; to see whether we can discover in any part of their schemes the awesome ability that might justify these bold undertakers in the superiority they assume over mankind. Relative to the size of the subject the survey will be a very short one.

(i) The constitution of the legislature

[Burke's topic (i) will run to page 108.] It is in the model of the sovereign and presiding part of this new republic that we should expect their grand display. Here they were to prove their title to their proud demands. For the plan itself at large, and for the reasons on which it is grounded, I refer to the journals of the Assembly of 29.ix.1789 and such subsequent proceedings as made any alterations in the plan. So far as I can see light in a somewhat confused matter, the system remains substantially as it was originally formed. My few remarks will be addressed to its spirit, its tendency [= 'its probable effects'], and its fitness for forming a popular commonwealth (which they profess theirs to be) suited to the purposes for which any commonwealth, and particularly a popular one, is made. At the same time I mean to consider its consistency with itself and its own principles.

Old establishments are tested by their effects. If the people are happy, united, wealthy, and powerful, we presume the rest. We conclude something to be good if good comes from it. In old establishments various correctives have been found for their aberrations from theory. Indeed, they are the results of various necessities and expediencies. They are not often constructed on the basis of any theory; rather, theories are drawn from them. In them we often see that the best way to the goal is through means that seem not to be perfectly consistent with what we originally planned to be doing. The means taught by experience may be better suited to political ends than those contrived in the original project. They react back on the original constitution, and sometimes bring improvements to the design itself that they seem to have departed from. I think all this might be exemplified in the British constitution. At worst, the errors and deviations of every kind in reckoning are found

and computed, and the ship proceeds in her course. This is the case of old establishments; but in a new and merely theoretic system every contrivance is expected to appear, on the face of it, to be right for its purpose, especially when those who are launching it are in no way constrained by attempts to accommodate the new building to an old one, either in the walls or on the foundations.

The French builders, clearing away as mere rubbish whatever they found and (like their ornamental gardeners) putting everything onto an exact level, propose to rest the whole local and general legislature on bases of three different kinds:

- one geometrical, which they call the basis of **territory**,
- one arithmetical, the basis of **population** and
- one financial, the basis of **contribution**.

(1) For purposes of bringing in **territory**, they divide their country into (a) 83 pieces, each a square of 18 square leagues. These large divisions are called Departments. They subdivide these into (b) 1720 square districts called Communes, which they further subdivide into (c) 6400 square districts called Cantons.

At first view this geometrical basis of theirs presents nothing much to admire or to blame. It calls for no great legislative talents. For such a plan as this all that is needed is an accurate land surveyor, with his chain, sight, and theodolite. In the old divisions of the country, various accidents at various times and the ebb and flow of various properties and jurisdictions settled their boundaries. These boundaries were not made on any fixed system, undoubtedly. They involved inconveniences, but *use* had found remedies for these and *habit* had supplied accommodation and patience. In this new pavement of square within square, and this organisation and semi-organisation made on the system of Empedocles and Buffon and not on any political principle,

there are bound to be countless local inconveniences to which men are not habituated. But these I pass over, because to specify them requires an accurate knowledge of the country, which I do not have.

When these state surveyors came to take a view of their work of measurement, they soon found that in politics the most fallacious of all things was geometrical demonstration. They then had recourse to another basis (or rather buttress) to support the building that was tottering on that false foundation. It was evident that the goodness of the soil, the number of the people, their wealth, and the largeness of their contribution made such infinite variations between square and square as •to make sheer size a ridiculous standard of power in the commonwealth, and •to make geometrical equality the most unequal of all measures in the distribution of men. However, they could not give it up. Instead, they divided their political and civil representation into three parts and allotted one of those parts to the square measurement, without a single fact or calculation to ascertain whether this territorial proportion of representation was fairly assigned, whether on any principle it really ought to be one-third. Anyway, having given to geometry one-third as her dower—as a compliment, I suppose, to that sublime science—they left the other two-thirds to be scuffled for between the other parts, population and contribution.

(2) When they came to provide for **population**, they could not proceed quite as smoothly as they had done in the field of their geometry. Here their arithmetic came to bear on their juridical metaphysics. If they had stuck to their metaphysical principles, the arithmetical process would have been simple: they hold that all men are strictly equal and entitled to equal rights in their own government. Each head, on this system, would have its vote, and every man would vote directly for the person who was to represent him in the legislature.

‘But soft—by regular degrees, not yet.’ This metaphysical principle to which law, custom, usage, policy and reason were to yield is itself to yield to their pleasure. There must be many degrees, and some stages, before the representative can come into contact with his constituent. Indeed, as we shall soon see, these two persons are to have no sort of communication with each other. (c) First, the voters in the Canton, who compose what they call ‘primary assemblies’, are to have a qualification. What! a qualification on the indefeasible rights of men? Yes; but it will be a very small qualification. Our injustice will be very little oppressive: only the local valuation of three days’ labour paid to the public. [That is: to belong to a primary assembly a man must pay an amount equal to three days’ pay in his locality.] This is not much, I readily admit, for anything but the utter subversion of your equalizing principle. As a qualification it might as well be let alone, for it achieves no one purpose for which qualifications are established; and on your ideas it excludes from a vote the man of all others whose natural equality stands the most in need of protection and defence—I mean the man who cannot afford the qualifying payment, and so has nothing but his natural equality to guard him. You order him to *buy* the right of which you had earlier told him that nature had given it to him, free, at his birth, and that no authority on earth could lawfully deprive him of it. With regard to the person who cannot come up to your market price, a tyrannous aristocracy is established against him at the very outset by you who pretend to be its sworn foe.

The gradation proceeds. These primary assemblies of the Canton elect (b) deputies to the Commune; one for every two hundred qualified inhabitants. Here is the first intermediary between the primary elector and the representative legislator, and here a new toll-gate is fixed for taxing the rights of men with a second qualification: to be elected into the Commune

a person has to pay the amount of ten days' labour. And we are not done yet. There is still to be another gradation. These Communes, chosen by the Canton, choose to **(a)** the Department; and the deputies of the Department choose their deputies to the National Assembly. Here is a third barrier of a senseless qualification. Every deputy to the National Assembly must pay a direct contribution with the value of a mark of silver. All these qualifying barriers are powerless to secure independence, strong only in destroying the rights of men.

In all this process, which in its fundamental elements purports to consider only population on a principle of natural right, there is a manifest attention to *property*; and this, however just and reasonable on other schemes, is perfectly indefensible on theirs.

(3) When they come to their third basis, **contribution**, we find that they have more completely lost sight of their rights of men. This last basis rests entirely on property, thus admitting a principle totally different from the equality of men, and utterly irreconcilable to it. But no sooner is this principle admitted than (as usual) it is subverted; and it is not subverted (as we shall presently see) so as to get the inequality of riches to approximate to the level of nature. The additional share in the third portion of representation (a portion reserved exclusively for the higher contribution) is made with regard only to the district and not to the individuals in it who pay. The course of their reasonings make it easy to see how embarrassed by their contradictory ideas of the rights of men and the privileges of riches. The committee of constitution virtually admit that they are wholly irreconcilable. They say:

'The relation with regard to the contributions is without doubt null when the question concerns the balance of the political rights as between individual

and individual, without which personal equality would be destroyed and an aristocracy of the rich would be established. But this inconvenience entirely disappears when the proportional relation of the contribution is only considered in the great masses, and is solely between province and province; it serves in that case only to form a just proportion between the cities without affecting the personal rights of the citizens.'

Here the principle of contribution, as taken between man and man, is rejected as null and destructive to equality, and also as pernicious because it leads to the establishment of an aristocracy of the rich. However, it must not be abandoned. And the way of getting rid of the difficulty is to establish the inequality as between department and department, leaving all the individuals in each department on an exact par. Notice that this equality between individuals had been before destroyed when the qualifications *within* the departments were settled; nor does it seem to matter much whether the equality of men is injured by masses or individually. An individual is not as important in a mass represented by a few as in a mass represented by many. It would be too much to tell a man who is touchy about his equality that the elector who votes for three members has the same franchise as the one who votes for ten.

Wealth and representation

Let us suppose that their principle of representation according to contribution—i.e. according to riches—is well thought-out and is a necessary basis for their republic. In this third basis of theirs they assume that •riches ought to be respected, and that justice and policy require that •they should entitle men to have in some way a larger share in the administration of public affairs; it is now to be seen

how the Assembly provides for the pre-eminence, or even for the security, of the rich by using their affluence as a basis for conferring on their district the larger measure of power that is denied to them personally. I readily admit (indeed I should lay it down as a fundamental principle) that in a republican government that has a democratic basis the rich do require more security than they need in monarchies. They are subject to envy, and through envy to oppression. On the present scheme it is impossible to see what advantage they get from the aristocratic preference on which the unequal representation of the masses is founded. The rich cannot feel it either as a support to their dignity or as security to their fortune, because the aristocratic mass is generated from purely democratic principles, and the preference given to it in the general representation has no reference to or connection with the persons on account of whose property this superiority of the mass is established. . . . The contest between the rich and the poor is not a struggle between corporation and corporation, but a contest between men and men—a competition not between districts but between descriptions [see Glossary]. It would answer its purpose better if the scheme were inverted: that the vote of the masses were rendered equal, and that the votes within each mass were proportioned to property.

Suppose one man in a district contributes as much as a hundred of his neighbours. Against these he has only one vote. If there were only one representative for the mass, his poor neighbours would outvote him 100:1 for that single representative. Bad enough. But amends are to be made to him. How? The district, in virtue of his wealth, is to choose (say) ten members instead of one; that is to say, by paying a very large contribution he has the happiness of being outvoted 100:1 by the poor for ten representatives, instead of being outvoted 100:1 for a single member. In fact

the rich man, instead of benefiting by this superior quantity of representation, is subjected to an additional hardship. The increase of representation within his province sets up nine persons more—and as many more than nine as there may be democratic candidates—to plot and intrigue and to flatter the people at his expense and to his oppression. An interest is by this means held out to multitudes of the inferior sort, in obtaining a salary of eighteen livres a day (to them a vast sum) besides the pleasure of a residence in Paris and their share in the government of the kingdom. The more the objects of ambition are multiplied and become democratic, the more the rich are endangered.

Thus it must fare between the poor and the rich in the province regarded as aristocratic, though internally it is the very reverse of that. As for its relation to the other provinces, I cannot see how the unequal representation that is given to masses on account of wealth becomes a means for preserving the balance and tranquillity of the commonwealth. If one of the objectives is to secure the weak from being crushed by the strong (as in all society it undoubtedly is), how are the smaller and poorer of these masses to be saved from the tyranny of the wealthier ones? Is it by adding to the wealthy further and more systematic means of oppressing them? When we come to a balance of representation between corporate bodies, provincial interests and emulations and jealousies are just as likely to arise among them as among individuals; and their divisions are likely to produce stronger dissension and something leading more nearly to a war.

[Burke now presents one extremely complex page presenting further defects in the system in which representation depends in part on contribution; followed by more than two pages of arithmetically detailed discussion of some fictional examples, showing that under the National Assembly's system one person may pay much *more* into the public purse

while having much *less* representation in the Assembly, for reasons having to do with how many people live in the same arbitrarily drawn square as he does, and with the average poverty or affluence of those people. An excuse for letting ourselves off all this comes from how he continues:]

I am afraid I have gone too far into their way of considering the formation of a constitution. They have much, but bad, metaphysics; much, but bad, geometry; much, but false, proportionate arithmetic; but if it were all as exact as metaphysics, geometry, and arithmetic ought to be, and if their schemes were perfectly consistent in all their parts, all that would produce is something that *looks* more elegant. It is remarkable that in this great arrangement of mankind *not one* reference is made to anything moral or anything political, nothing that relates to the concerns, actions, passions, and interests of men. . . .

You see I consider this constitution only as electoral, as leading by steps to the National Assembly. I do not enter into the internal government of the **(a)** departments and their genealogy through the **(b)** communes and **(c)** cantons. In the original plan these local governments are to be as nearly as possible composed in the same manner and on the same principles as the elective assemblies. Each of them is a body perfectly compact and rounded in itself.

Treating France like a conquered country

You cannot help seeing that this scheme has a direct and immediate tendency to cut France up into a variety of republics, making them totally independent of each other without any direct constitutional means of coherence, connection, or subordination, except what can come from their going along with the decisions of the general congress of the ambassadors from each independent republic. That is what the National

Assembly really is. I admit that such governments do exist in the world, though in forms infinitely more suitable to the local and habitual circumstances of their people. But such *associations* (not really political bodies) have generally been the effect of necessity, not choice; and I believe the present French power is the very first body of citizens who, having obtained full authority to do with their country what they pleased, have chosen to cut it up in this barbarous manner.

It is impossible not to observe that in the spirit of this geometrical distribution and arithmetical arrangement these pretended citizens treat France exactly like a conquered country. Acting as conquerors, they have imitated the policy of the harshest of that harsh race. The policy of such barbarous victors, who contemn a subdued people and insult their feelings, has always been as much as possible to destroy all vestiges of the ancient country, in religion, in polity, in laws, and in manners; to confound all territorial limits; to produce general poverty; to put up their properties to auction; to crush their princes, nobles, and pontiffs; to lay low everything that had lifted its head above the level or that could serve to combine or rally their distressed and disbanded people under the standard of old opinion. They have made France ‘free’ in the way the Romans, those sincere friends of the rights of mankind, ‘freed’ Greece, Macedon, and other nations. They destroyed the bonds of their union on the pretence of providing for the independence of each of their cities.

When the members who compose these new bodies of cantons, communes, and departments—arrangements purposely produced through the medium of confusion—begin to act, they will find themselves in a great measure strangers to one another. The electors and elected throughout, especially in the rural cantons, will be frequently without any civil habitudes or connections, or any of the natural discipline

that is the soul of a true republic. Magistrates and collectors of revenue are now no longer acquainted with their districts, bishops with their dioceses, or curates with their parishes. These new colonies of the rights of men bear a strong resemblance to the sort of military colonies that Tacitus commented on in the declining policy of Rome. In better and wiser days (whatever course they took with foreign nations) they were careful to make the elements of methodical subordination and settlement to be coeval, and even to lay the foundations of civil discipline in the military. But when all the good arts had fallen into ruin, they proceeded as your Assembly does on the equality of men, and with as little judgment or care for the things that make a republic tolerable or durable. But in this as in almost everything, your new commonwealth is born and bred and fed in the corruptions that mark degenerated and worn-out republics. Your child comes into the world with the symptoms of death: the *facies Hippocratica* forms the character of its facial appearance and the prognostic of its fate. [The *facies Hippocratica* is the face of someone who is starving, super-exhausted, dying, or the like.]

The legislators who formed the ancient republics knew that their business was too arduous to be accomplished with no better apparatus than the metaphysics of an undergraduate, and the mathematics and arithmetic of a tax-collector. They had to do with *men*, and were obliged to study human nature. They had to do with *citizens*, and were obliged to study the effects of the habits that are communicated by the circumstances of civil life. They were aware that the operation of this second nature on the first produced a new combination; and from that arose many diversities among men, according to their birth, their education, their professions, the periods of their lives, their residence in towns or in the country, their various ways of acquiring and of fixing property, and according to the quality of the

property itself—all of which made them so many different species of animals, as it were. From hence they thought themselves obliged to •sort their citizens into classes, and to place them in situations in the state, appropriate to their particular habits, and to •give them privileges

- that are needed to secure for them what their particular occasions require, and
- that might provide each description with force to protect itself in the conflicts caused by the diversity of interests that must exist and must quarrel in any complex society.

The legislator would have been ashamed if

the coarse husbandman knew how to sort and to use his sheep, horses, and oxen, and had enough common sense not to abstract and equalise them all into mere *animals in general* without providing for each kind an appropriate food, care, and employment,

while

he, the economist, disposer and shepherd of his own kindred, elevating himself into an airy metaphysician, was resolved to know nothing of his flocks except as *men in general*.

That is why Montesquieu remarked very justly that the great legislators of antiquity made the greatest display of their powers, and even soared above themselves, in their classification of the citizens. It is here that your modern legislators have gone deep into the negative series, and sunk even below their own *nothing*. As the first sort of legislators attended to the different kinds of citizens and combined them into one commonwealth, the others—the metaphysical and alchemistic legislators—have taken the directly opposite course. They have done their best to run all sorts of citizens together into one homogeneous mass; and then they divided this mass of theirs into a number of incoherent republics.

They reduce men to loose counters, merely for the sake of simple counting, and not to figures whose power is to arise from their place in the table. . . .

They have levelled and crushed together all the orders that they found, even under the coarse unartificial arrangement of the monarchy where the classifying of the citizens is less important than it is in a republic. But every such classification, if properly ordered, is good in all forms of government: it creates a strong barrier against the excesses of despotism, and is the necessary means of giving effect and permanence to a republic. For lack of something of this kind, if the present project of a republic should fail, all securities to a moderated freedom fail along with it; all the indirect restraints that mitigate despotism are removed, so that if monarchy ever again obtains an entire ascendancy in France, under this or under any other dynasty, if it is not voluntarily tempered from the outset by the wise and virtuous counsels of the prince, it will probably be the most completely arbitrary power ever seen on earth. This is to play a most desperate game.

They even declare that one of their objectives is the confusion that comes with all such proceedings: they hope to secure their constitution by a terror of a return of those evils that came with their making it. 'By this,' they say, 'its destruction will become difficult for any authority, which cannot break it up without the entire disorganisation of the whole state.' They presume that if this 'take-over' authority ever came to the same degree of power that they have acquired, it would make a more moderate and chastised use of it, and would piously tremble to entirely disorganise the state in the savage manner that they have done. They look to the virtues of returning despotism for the security that is to be enjoyed by the offspring of their popular vices.

Consequences of the fragmenting of France

I wish, Sir, that you and my readers would attend carefully to the work of M. de Calonne on this subject. It is an eloquent, able and instructive performance. I confine myself to what he says relating to the constitution of the new state and to the condition of the revenue. I do not wish to pronounce on this minister's disputes with his rivals. Nor do I mean to risk any opinion concerning his ways and means—financial or political—for taking his country out of its present deplorable situation of servitude, anarchy, bankruptcy, and beggary. I am less optimistic than he is; but he is a Frenchman, and has a closer duty relative to those topics than I can have, and better means of judging concerning them. I would like special attention to be paid to the explicit announcement that he refers to, made by one of the principal leaders in the Assembly, concerning the tendency of their scheme to bring France not only from a monarchy to a republic but from a republic to a mere confederacy. It adds new force to my observations, and indeed M. de Calonne's work makes up for my deficiencies by many new and striking arguments on most of the subjects of this letter.

This resolution to break their country into separate republics is what has driven them into the greatest number of their difficulties and contradictions. If it were not for this, all the questions of exact equality and these never-to-be-settled balances of

individual rights — population — contribution
would be wholly useless. The representation, though derived from parts, would be a duty that equally concerned the whole. Each deputy to the Assembly would be the representative of *France*, and of all its descriptions [see Glossary], of the many and the few, of the rich and the poor, of the great districts and the small. All these districts would themselves

be subordinate to some standing authority that existed independently of them, an authority in which their representation (and everything pertaining to it) originated and to which it was pointed. This government—standing, unalterable, and fundamental—is the only thing that could make that territory truly and properly a whole. In Great Britain when we elect popular representatives we send them to a council—the House of Commons—in which each man individually is a subject and submitted to a government that is complete in all its ordinary functions. With you the elective Assembly is the sovereign, the *sole* sovereign, so all its members are integral parts of this sole sovereignty. But with us it is totally different. With us the representative, separated from the other parts, can have no action and no existence. The government is the point of reference of the various members and districts of our representation. This is the centre of our unity. This government of reference is a trustee for •the whole and not for •the parts. So is the other branch of our public council, I mean the House of Lords. With us the king and the lords are several and joint securities for the equality of each district, each province, each city. When did you hear of any province in Great Britain suffering from the inequality of its representation or from having no representation at all? Not only our monarchy and our peerage secure the equality on which our unity depends, but it is the spirit of the House of Commons itself. The very inequality of representation that is so foolishly complained of is perhaps the very thing which prevents us from thinking or acting as members for districts. Cornwall elects as many members as all Scotland. But is Cornwall better taken care of than Scotland? Apart from the members of some giddy clubs, few here trouble their heads about any of your bases. . . .

Your new constitution is the very reverse of ours in its principle; and I am astonished that anyone could dream

of offering anything done in it as an example for Great Britain. With you there is little connection—actually, *no* connection—between the last representative and the first constituent. The member who goes to the National Assembly is not chosen by the people or accountable to them. There are three elections before he is chosen; two sets of magistracy intervene between him and the primary assembly, so as to make him (I repeat) •an ambassador of a state and not •a representative of the people within a state. The whole spirit of the election is changed by this, and no corrective devised by your constitution-mongers can make him anything but what he is. The very attempt to do it would inevitably introduce a more horrid confusion than the present, if such a thing is possible. The only way to connect the original constituent with the representative is by circuitous means which lead the candidate to apply in the first instance to the primary electors, in order that by their authoritative instructions (and something more perhaps) these primary electors may force the two succeeding bodies of electors to make a choice agreeable to their wishes. But this would plainly subvert the whole scheme. It would •plunge them back into the tumult and confusion of popular election which they mean to avoid by their interposed gradation of elections, and at length •put the whole fortune of the state in the hands of those who have the least knowledge of it and the least interest in it. This is a perpetual dilemma into which they are thrown by the vicious, weak, and contradictory principles they have chosen. Unless the people break up and flatten this gradation they obviously do not *really* elect to the Assembly—indeed, they don't even *appear* to do so.

What are we all looking for in an election? To meet its real purposes, you must first be able to know the fitness of your man, and then you must retain some hold on him by personal obligation or dependence. What can the primary

electors in your system be looking for? They can never know anything of the qualities of the person who is to serve them, nor has he any obligation whatsoever to them. Of all the powers unfit to be delegated by those who have any real means of judging, the most unfit is anything that relates to a personal choice. In case of abuse, your body of primary electors never can call the representative to an account for his conduct: he is too distant from them in the chain of representation. If he acts improperly at the end of his two years' term, it does not concern him for two years more. By the new French constitution the best and the wisest representatives go equally with the worst into this set-aside status. Their hulls are supposed to have barnacles, so they must go into dock to be refitted. Every man who has served in an assembly is ineligible for two years after. Just as these magistrates begin to learn their trade, like chimney sweepers, they are disqualified for exercising it. . . . Your constitution has too much jealousy to have much sense in it. You consider the breach of trust in the representative so principally that you do not at all regard the question of his fitness to execute it.

This set-aside interval is not unfavourable to a faithless representative, who may be as good a canvasser as he was a bad governor. In this time he may plot his way into a superiority over the wisest and most virtuous. All the members of this elective constitution are equally fleeting and exist only for the election, so the persons who originally chose him may be quite different from the ones to whom he is to be responsible when he asks for a renewal of his trust. To call all the secondary electors of the Commune to account is ridiculous, impracticable, and unjust; they may themselves have been deceived in their choice, as the third set of electors, those of the Department, may be in theirs. In your elections responsibility cannot exist.

Cement 1: paper money

Finding no sort of principle [see Glossary] of coherence with each other in the nature and constitution of the many new republics of France, I considered what cement the legislators had provided for them from any extraneous materials. I take no notice of their confederations, their spectacles, their civic feasts, and their fanatical excitement; those are mere tricks. But tracing their policy through their actions, I think I can pick out the arrangements by which they propose to hold these republics together. The first is the confiscation, with the accompanying paper currency; the second is the supreme power of the city of Paris; the third is the general army of the state, which I shan't discuss until page 114, when I come to consider the army as a separate topic.

I cannot deny that the operation of the confiscation and the paper currency—one depending on the other—may for some time constitute some sort of cement, unless the madness and folly in their management and in the adjusting of the parts to make them fit produces a repulsion at the very outset. But admitting the scheme to have some coherence and some duration, I think that if after a while the confiscation turns out not to be sufficient to support the paper currency (as I am morally certain it will not), then instead of cementing these confederate republics together it will add infinitely to their dissociation, distraction, and confusion. . . . And if the confiscation sinks the paper currency, the cement is gone with the circulation. In the meantime its binding force will be uncertain, tightening or loosening with every variation in the credit of the paper.

The only thing that is certain in this scheme is its effect in producing an oligarchy in every one of the republics. (This looks like a side-effect, but I have no doubt that in the minds of those who conduct this business it is directly aimed at.)

A paper circulation

- not backed by any real money deposited or promised,
- amounting now to £44,000,000 of English money, and
- compulsorily** substituted for the coin of the kingdom, thus becoming the substance of its revenue as well as the medium of all its commercial and civil business,

must put into the hands of the managers and conductors of this circulation the whole of whatever power, authority, and influence is left.

In England we feel the influence of the Bank, though it is only the centre of a **voluntary** dealing. You would have to know little indeed of the influence of money on mankind if you did not see the force of the management of a moneyed concern that is •so much more extensive and •so much more dependent on the managers than any of ours are. But this is not merely a money concern. Another working part of the system is inseparably connected with this money management, namely the means of drawing out at discretion portions of the confiscated lands for sale, and carrying on a process of continual change of paper into land, and of land into paper. When we follow this process in its effects we can conceive something of the intensity of the force with which this system must operate. By this means the spirit of money-jobbing and speculation goes into the mass of land itself and incorporates with it. By this kind of operation that sort of property becomes (as it were) volatilised; it assumes an unnatural and monstrous activity, and thereby throws into the hands of the various managers—principal and subordinate, Parisian and provincial—all the ‘money’ and perhaps a full 10% of all the land in France, which has now acquired the worst and most pernicious part of the evil of a paper circulation, namely great uncertainty in its value. . . .

The new dealers, being all habitually adventurers and

without any fixed habits or local biases, will purchase so as to re-sell, as the market of paper or of money or of land presents an advantage. A holy bishop—Talleyrand, bishop of Autun—thinks that agriculture will derive great advantages from the ‘enlightened’ usurers who are to purchase the church confiscations. Well, I am an old farmer if not a good one; and with great humility I beg leave to tell his late lordship that usury is not a tutor to agriculture; and if the word ‘enlightened’ is understood according to the new dictionary, as it always is in your new schools, I cannot conceive how a man’s not believing in God can teach him to cultivate the earth with the slightest additional skill or encouragement. ‘I sow to the immortal gods’, said an old Roman, when he held one handle of the plough while Death held the other. You could bring together •all the directors of the two academies and •the directors of the *Caisse d’Escompte*, and one old experienced peasant is worth them all. I have learned more about a curious and interesting branch of husbandry in one short conversation with an old Carthusian monk than I have derived from all the Bank directors I ever talked with. But there is no cause for anxiety about money dealers meddling with the rural economy. These gentlemen are too wise in their generation. At first, perhaps, their tender and susceptible imaginations may be captivated by the innocent and unprofitable delights of a pastoral life; but they will soon find that agriculture is a more laborious and less lucrative trade than the one they had left. After making its panegyric, they will turn their backs on it. . . . They will cultivate the *Caisse d’Eglise*, under the sacred auspices of this prelate, with much more profit than its vineyards and its cornfields. They will employ their talents according to their habits and their interests. They will not follow the plough while they can direct treasuries and govern provinces.

A nation of gamblers

Your legislators, in everything new, are the first to found a commonwealth on gaming [= 'gambling'], infusing this spirit into it as its vital breath. The great aim in these politics is to change France from a great kingdom into a great play-table; to turn its inhabitants into a nation of gamesters; to make speculation as extensive as life; to mix it with all its concerns and to divert the whole of the hopes and fears of the people from their usual channels into the impulses, passions, and superstitions of those who live on chances. They loudly proclaim that their present system of a republic cannot possibly exist without this kind of gaming fund, and that the very thread of its life is spun out of the raw materials of these speculations. The old gaming in funds was harmful enough, undoubtedly, but only to individuals. Even when it had its greatest extent, in the Mississippi and South Sea, it affected comparatively few. . . . But where the law, which in most circumstances forbids gaming and in none countenances it, is itself debauched so as to reverse its nature and policy and openly *force* the subject to this destructive table by bringing the spirit and symbols of gaming into the minutest matters and engaging everybody in it, a more dreadful epidemic illness of that kind is spread than yet has appeared in the world. With you a man can neither earn nor buy his dinner without a speculation. What he receives in the morning will not have the same value at night. What he is compelled to take as payment for an old debt will not be received as the same when he comes to pay a debt contracted by himself, nor will it be the same when by prompt payment he would avoid contracting any debt at all. Industry must wither away. Economy must be driven from your country. Careful provision will have no existence. Who will labour without knowing the amount of his pay? Who will study to increase

what none can estimate? Who will accumulate, when he does not know the value of what he saves? If you abstract it from its uses in gaming, to accumulate your paper wealth would be not the providence of a man but the crazy instinct of a jackdaw.

The truly melancholy part of the policy of systematically making a nation of gamesters is this: all are forced to play but few can understand the game, and fewer still are in a position to make use of the knowledge. The many must be the dupes of the few who conduct the machine of these speculations. What effect it must have on the country people is visible. The townsman can calculate from day to day, not so the inhabitant of the country. When the peasant first brings his corn to market, the magistrate in the towns obliges him to take the *assignat* [see Glossary] at par; when he goes to the shop with his money he finds it 7% the worse for crossing the street. He will not readily go to this market again. The townspeople will be inflamed; they will force the country people to bring their corn. Resistance will begin, and the murders of Paris and St. Denis may be renewed through all France.

In your theory of representation the country is perhaps given more than its share. What does this empty compliment signify? Where have you placed the real power over moneyed and landed circulation? Where have you placed the means of raising and lowering the value of every man's freehold? Those whose operations can take from or add 10% to the possessions of every man in France must be the masters of every man in France. The whole of the power obtained by this revolution will settle in the towns among the burghers and the moneyed directors who lead them. The landed gentleman, the yeoman, and the peasant do not, any of them, have habits or inclinations or experience that can lead them to any share in this, which is the sole source of power and

influence now left in France. The very nature of a country life, the very nature of landed property, in all the occupations and pleasures they provide, render combination and arrangement (the sole way of getting and exerting influence) impossible among country people. Combine them by all the art you can, and all the industry, they are always dissolving into individuality. Anything in the nature of incorporation is almost impracticable among them. Hope, fear, alarm, jealousy, the ephemeral rumour that does its business and dies in a day—these are the reins and spurs by which leaders check or urge the minds of followers, and they are not easily employed among scattered people. They assemble, they arm, they act with the utmost difficulty and at the greatest charge. Their efforts, if ever they can be started, cannot be sustained. They cannot proceed systematically. If the country gentlemen attempt an influence through the mere income of their property, what can they do against those who have ten times their income to sell and who can ruin their property by bringing their plunder to meet it at the market? If the landed man takes out a mortgage, he lowers the value of his land and raises the value of *assignats* [see Glossary]. He increases his enemy's power by the very means he must take to contend with him. So the country gentleman, the man of liberal views and habits, attached to no profession, will be as completely excluded from the government of his country as if he were an outlaw. It is obvious that in the towns all the things that conspire against the country gentleman combine in favour of the money manager and director. In towns combination is natural. The habits of burghers, their occupations, their diversion, their business, their idleness continually bring them into mutual contact. Their virtues and their vices are sociable; they are always in garrison; and they come embodied and half disciplined into the hands of those who plan to use them for civil or military action.

All these considerations leave no doubt in my mind that if this monster of a constitution can continue France will be wholly governed by the agitators in corporations, by societies in the towns formed of directors of *assignats*, and trustees for the sale of church lands, attorneys, agents, money jobbers, speculators, and adventurers, composing an ignoble oligarchy based on the destruction of the crown, the church, the nobility, and the people. Here end all the deceitful dreams and visions of the equality and rights of men. In the Serbonian bog [look it up in Wikipedia] of this base oligarchy they are all absorbed, sunk, and lost forever.

One might be tempted to think that some great offences in France must cry to heaven, which has thought fit to punish it by subjecting it to a vile and inglorious domination in which no comfort or compensation is to be found in any of those false 'splendours' that prevent mankind from feeling themselves dishonoured even while they are oppressed. I must confess I am touched with a sorrow, mixed with some indignation, at the conduct of a few men—once of great rank and still of great character—who. . . have engaged in a business too deep for the lead-line of their understanding to fathom; who have lent their fair reputation and the authority of their high-sounding titles to the designs of men with whom they could not be acquainted, and have thereby made their very virtues operate to the ruin of their country.

So much for the first cementing principle.

Cement 2: the power of Paris

The second material of cement for their new republic is the superiority of the city of Paris, which is indeed strongly connected with the other cementing principle of paper circulation and confiscation. It is in this part of the project that we must look for the cause of the destruction of all the

old boundaries of provinces and jurisdictions, ecclesiastical and secular, and the dissolution of all ancient combinations of things, as well as the formation of so many small unconnected republics. The power of the city of Paris is evidently one great spring of all their politics. It is through the power of Paris, now become the centre and focus of jobbing, that the leaders of this faction command the whole legislative and the whole executive government. Everything, therefore, must be done that can confirm the authority of that city over the other republics. Paris is compact; she has an enormous strength, vastly greater than that of any of the square republics; and this strength is collected and condensed within a small area. [To understand the phrase 'square republics' see paragraph (1) on page 95.] Paris has a natural and easy connection among its parts, which will not be affected by any scheme of a geometrical constitution; and it does not matter much whether its proportion of representation is more or less, because it has the whole draft of fishes in its dragnet, .i.e. in the National Assembly. The other divisions of the kingdom, being hacked and torn to pieces and separated from all their habitual means and principles of union, cannot in the mean time unite against her. Nothing was to be left in all the subordinate divisions but weakness, disconnection, and confusion. To confirm this part of the plan the Assembly has recently resolved that no two of their republics shall have the same commander-in-chief.

To a person who takes a view of the whole, this 'strength' that Paris has will appear to be a system of general weakness. It is boasted that the geometrical policy has been adopted, that all *local* ideas should be sunk, and that the people should no longer be Gascons, Picards, Bretons, Normans, but *Frenchmen* with one country, one heart, and one Assembly. But instead of being all Frenchmen, the inhabitants of that region are more likely soon to have no country. No

man was ever attached by a sense of pride, partiality, or real affection to a description of square measurement. He never will glory in belonging to 'Chequer no. 71' or to any other badge-ticket. We begin our public affections in our families. (No-one who is cold in his family relationships is a zealous citizen.) We pass on to our neighbourhoods and our habitual provincial connections. These are inns and resting places. Such divisions of our country as have been formed by habit, and not by a sudden jerk of authority, were so many little images of the great country in which the heart found something it could fill. Love for the whole is not extinguished by this subordinate partiality. Perhaps it is a sort of elemental training for those higher and broader concerns that men come to have for the prosperity of a kingdom as extensive as France. Citizens' *caring* about that general territory itself, as about former provinces, comes from old prejudices and unreasoned habits and not from the geometric properties of its shape! The power and pre-eminence of Paris does certainly press down and hold these republics together as long as it lasts. But, for the reasons I have already given you, I think it cannot last very long.

Passing from the civil-creating and civil-cementing principles of this constitution to the National Assembly, which is to appear and act as sovereign, we see a body in its constitution with every possible power and no possible external control. We see a body that has no fundamental laws, no established maxims, no respected rules of proceeding, a body that nothing can keep firm to any system whatsoever. Their idea of their powers is always taken at the utmost stretch of legislative competence, and their examples for ordinary cases come from the exceptions of the most urgent necessity. The future is to be in most respects like the present Assembly; but. . . it will soon be purged of the small degree of internal control existing in a minority chosen originally from various

interests, and preserving something of their spirit. If possible, the next Assembly must be worse than the present one. The latter, by destroying and altering everything, will leave to their successors apparently nothing popular to do. They will be roused by emulation and example to bold and absurd enterprises. To suppose such an Assembly sitting in perfect quietude is ridiculous.

Your all-sufficient legislators, in their hurry to do everything at once, have forgotten one thing that seems essential, and which I believe never has been before, in the theory or the practice, omitted by any projector of a republic. They have forgotten to constitute a *senate* or something of that nature and character. Never before this time was heard of a body politic composed of one legislative and active assembly, and its executive officers, without such a council, without something to which foreign states might connect themselves; something to which, in the ordinary detail of government, the people could look up; something which might give a bias and steadiness, and preserve something like consistency in the proceedings of state. Kings generally have such a body as a council. A monarchy may exist without it, but it seems to be in the very essence of a republican government. It holds a sort of middle place between the supreme power exercised by the people, or immediately delegated from them, and the mere executive. Of this there are no traces in your constitution, and in providing nothing of this kind your Solons and Numas have, as much as in anything else, revealed a sovereign incapacity.

(ii) Forming an executive power

[The '(ii)' in that heading refers back to the numbered list of topics on page 94]. Let us now turn our eyes to what they have done toward the formation of an executive power. For this they

have chosen a downgraded king. This first executive officer of theirs is to be a machine without any sort of deliberative discretion in any one act of his function. At best he is but a channel to convey to the National Assembly such facts as that body may need to know. If he had been made the exclusive channel, the power would have had some importance, though it would have been infinitely perilous to those who chose to exercise it. But public intelligence and statements of facts can reach the Assembly with equal authenticity by any other route. So the king's office of providing intelligence is insignificant.

I shall consider the French scheme of an executive officer in its two natural divisions—**(a)** civil and **(b)** political.

(a) According to the new constitution, the higher parts of judicature. . . . are not in the king. The king of France is not the fountain of justice. He does not nominate either the lower-court or the appellate judges. He neither proposes the candidates, nor has a negative on the choice. He is not even the public prosecutor. He serves only as a notary to authenticate the choice made of the judges in the several districts. By his officers he is to carry out their sentence. When we look into the true nature of his authority, he appears to be nothing more than a chief of debt-collectors, sergeants at mace, tax-collectors, gaolers, and hangmen. It is impossible to place anything called 'royalty' in a more degrading position. It would have been a thousand times better for the dignity of this unhappy prince if he had nothing at all to do with the administration of justice, given that he is deprived of all that is venerable and all that is consolatory in that function, without power of originating any process, without a power of suspension, mitigation, or pardon. Everything in justice that is vile and odious is thrown upon him. . . . It would be unnatural for the king of the French, situated as he now is, to respect himself or be respected by others.

(b) Consider this new executive officer on the side of his political capacity, as he acts under the orders of the National Assembly. To apply *laws* is a royal office; to carry out *orders* is not to be a king. Still, a political executive magistracy—even if that is all it is—is a great trust. It is a trust indeed that has much depending on its faithful and diligent performance, both in the person presiding in it and in all his subordinates. Means of performing this duty ought to be given by regulation; and dispositions toward it ought to be infused by the circumstances attendant on the trust. It ought to be environed with dignity, authority, and consideration, and it ought to lead to glory. . . . What sort of person is a king to command executive service when he has no means to reward it? Not in a permanent office; not in a grant of land; no, not in a pension of £50 a year; not in the vainest and most trivial title. In France, the king is no more the fountain of honour than he is the fountain of justice. All rewards, all distinctions are in other hands. Those who serve the king can be driven by no natural motive except fear—by a fear of everything except their master. His functions of internal coercion are as odious as the ones he exercises in the department of justice. If relief is to be given to any municipality, the Assembly gives it. If troops are to be sent to reduce them to obedience to the Assembly, the king is to carry out the order; and on every occasion he is to be spattered with the blood of his people. He has no negative; yet his name and authority is used to enforce every harsh decree. He must even concur in the butchery of anyone who tries to free him from his imprisonment or show the slightest attachment to his person or to his former authority.

Executive magistracy ought to be constituted in such a way that those who compose it should be disposed to love and to venerate those whom they are bound to obey. The wisest counsels ·or commands· can be ruined by deliberate

neglect or (worse) by literal obedience that is perverse and malignant. In vain will the law attempt to anticipate or to follow such studied neglects and fraudulent attentions. To make subordinates act zealously is not in the competence of law. Kings, even ones who really *are* kings, can and ought to bear the •freedom of subjects who are obnoxious to them. They can even, without derogating from themselves, bear the •authority of such persons if it promotes their service. Louis XIII had a mortal hatred of the Cardinal de Richelieu, but his support of that minister against his rivals was the source of all the glory of his reign and the solid foundation of his throne itself. Louis XIV did not love the Cardinal Mazarin, but for his interests he preserved him in power. . . . But these ministers, who were chosen by affairs and not by affections, acted in the name of kings and in trust for them, not as their avowed, constitutional, and ostensible masters. I think it impossible that any king, when he has recovered his first terrors, can cordially infuse vivacity and vigour into measures that he knows to be dictated by people who (he must be sure) are in the highest degree antagonistic to his person. Will any ministers who serve such a king (or whatever he may be called) with merely a decent appearance of respect happily obey the orders of people whom they had recently committed to the Bastille in his name?. . . . If you expect such obedience among your other innovations and regenerations, you ought to make a revolution in nature and provide a new constitution for the human mind! Otherwise, your supreme government cannot harmonise with its executive system. There are cases in which we cannot take up with names and abstractions. You may call half a dozen leading individuals whom we have reason to fear and hate ‘the nation’. It makes no difference except to make us fear and hate them more. If it had been thought justifiable and expedient to make such a revolution

by such means and through such persons as you have made yours, it would have been wiser to complete the business of the fifth and sixth of October by removing the King from the picture entirely. The new executive officer would then owe his situation to those who are his creators as well as his masters, and he might be bound in . . . in gratitude to serve those who had promoted him to a place of great wealth and great sensual indulgence. . . .

A king in circumstances like those of the present king of France, if he is so totally stupefied by his misfortunes that he thinks it the premium and privilege of life to eat and sleep without any regard to glory, can never be fit for the office. If he feels as men commonly feel, he must be aware that an office in such circumstances is one in which he can obtain no fame or reputation. He has no warm-hearted interest that can excite him to action. At best, his conduct will be passive and defensive. To inferior people such an office might be matter of honour. But being raised to it is different from descending to it, and suggests different sentiments. If he really names the ministers, they will have a sympathy with him. If they are forced on him, the whole business between them and the nominal king will be mutual counteraction. In all other countries, the office of ministers of state is of the highest dignity. In France it is full of peril and incapable of glory. Yet ministers in France will have rivals in their nothingness, while shallow ambition exists in the world or the desire for a miserable salary is an incentive to short-sighted avarice. Your constitution enables those competitors of the ministers to attack them in their vital parts, while they have no means of repelling their charges except in the degrading character of culprits. The ministers of state in France are the only persons in that country who cannot have a share in the national councils. What ministers! What councils! What a nation! —'But they are

responsible.' It is a poor service that is to be had from responsibility. The elevation of mind to be derived from fear will never make a nation glorious. Responsibility prevents crimes. It makes all attempts against the laws dangerous. But only idiots could think of responsibility as a principle [see Glossary] of active and zealous service. Is the conduct of a war to be entrusted to a man who may abhor its principle, whose every step to make it successful confirms the power of those by whom he is oppressed? Will foreign states seriously treat with him who has no prerogative of peace or war? No, not so much as in a single vote by himself or his ministers, or by anyone he can possibly influence. A state of contempt is not a state for a prince; better get rid of him at once.

I know it will be said that these feelings and attitudes in the court and executive government will continue only through this generation, and that the king has been brought to declare the dauphin [his oldest son] will be educated in conformity to his situation. If he is made to conform to his situation, he will have no education at all! His training will be even worse than that of an arbitrary monarch. If he reads, some good or evil genius will tell him his ancestors were kings, and from then on his objective must be to assert himself and to avenge his parents. This you will say is not his duty. That may be; but it is nature; and while you turn nature against you, you do unwisely to trust to duty. In this futile scheme of polity, the state now nurses in its bosom a source of weakness, perplexity, counteraction, inefficiency, and decay; and it prepares the means of its final ruin. In short, I see nothing in the executive *force* (I cannot call it 'authority') that has even an appearance of vigour, or that has the smallest degree of suitable correspondence or symmetry or amicable relation with the supreme power, either as it now exists or as it is planned for the future government.

You have settled, by an economy as perverted as the policy, two establishments of government—one real, one fictitious. Both maintained at a vast expense, the cost of the fictitious one being greater, I think. Such a machine as the latter is not worth the grease of its wheels. The expense is exorbitant, and neither the •show nor the •use deserve a tenth part of the charge.

‘Oh! but you don’t do justice to the talents of the legislators; you don’t allow, as you should, for necessity. Their scheme of executive force was not their choice. This pageant must be kept. The people would not consent to part with it.’

Right; I understand you. In spite of your grand theories, to which you would have heaven and earth to bend, you *do* know how to conform yourselves to the nature and circumstances of things. But when you were obliged to conform thus far to circumstances, you ought to have carried your submission further and to have made a proper instrument that would be useful for its purposes. That was in your power. For instance, among many other options, it was in your power to leave to your king the right of peace and war. What! to leave to the executive magistrate the most dangerous of all prerogatives? I know of none more dangerous, nor any more necessary to be so trusted. I do not say that this prerogative ought to be trusted to your king unless he enjoyed other auxiliary trusts along with it, which he does not now have. But if he did possess them, hazardous as they undoubtedly are, such a constitution would have advantages more than compensating for the risk. There is no other way of keeping the various potentates of Europe from intriguing separately and personally with the members of your Assembly, intermeddling in all your concerns, and fomenting in the heart of your country the most pernicious of all factions—ones serving the interests and under the

direction of foreign powers. From that worst of evils, thank God, we in Great Britain are still free. Your skill, if you had any, would be well employed finding indirect correctives and controls upon this perilous trust. If you did not like the ones we in England have chosen, your leaders might have exercised their abilities in designing something better. . . .

I hear that the persons who are called ministers have signified an intention of resigning their places. I am astonished that they did not resign long ago. The situation they have been in for the past year is one I wouldn’t have stood in for all the world. They wished well, I take it for granted, to the revolution. Be that as it may, they were placed on a height—though a height of humiliation—from which they *must* have seen. . . .the evils that have been produced by that revolution. In every step they took or forbore to take they must have felt the degraded situation of their country and their utter inability to serve it. They are in a kind of subordinate servitude that has no precedent in history. Without confidence from their sovereign, on whom they were forced, or from the Assembly, who forced them on him, all the noble functions of their office are performed by committees of the Assembly without any regard for their personal or their official authority. They are to execute, without power; they are to be responsible, without discretion; they are to deliberate, without choice. In their puzzled situations, under two sovereigns with no influence on either, they must act in such a way that (whatever they may intend) they sometimes betray the one, sometimes the other, and always betray themselves. Such has been their situation, such must be the situation of those who follow them. . . .

The abolition of the *parlements*

I can see as little genius and talent in the plan of judicature formed by the National Assembly ·as I see in its other plans·. According to their invariable course, the framers of your constitution began by utterly abolishing the *parlements*. These venerable bodies, like the rest of the old government, needed to be reformed whether or not there was any change in the monarchy. . . . But a good many features of their constitution deserved approval from the wise. They had one fundamental excellence: they were independent. The most doubtful feature of their office, namely its being something that could be bought and sold, contributed to this independence of character. They held for life. Indeed, they may be said to have held by inheritance. Appointed by the monarch, they were considered as nearly out of his power. The most determined exertions of the monarch against them only showed their radical independence. They composed permanent political bodies, constituted to resist arbitrary innovation; and from that corporate constitution, and from most of their forms, they were well calculated to afford both certainty and stability to the laws. They were a safe asylum to secure these laws in all the ups and downs of mood and opinion. They saved that sacred deposit of the country—its laws—during the reigns of arbitrary princes and the struggles of arbitrary factions. They kept alive the memory and record of the constitution. They were the great security to private property which might be said (when personal liberty had no existence) to be as well guarded in France as in any other country. Whatever is supreme in a state ought to have, as far as possible, its judicial authority so constituted as not only not to depend on it but in some way to balance it. It ought to give a security to its justice against its power. It ought to make its judicature, as it were, something exterior to the state.

These *parlements* had provided (not the best, but) some corrective to the monarchy's excesses and vices. Such an independent judicature was much more necessary when a democracy became the absolute power of the country. In that constitution what you have contrived—elective, temporary, local judges, exercising their dependent functions in a narrow society—is the worst of all tribunals. It will be vain to look to them for any appearance of justice toward strangers, toward the obnoxious rich, toward the minority of routed parties, toward all those who in the election have supported unsuccessful candidates. It will be impossible to keep the new tribunals clear of the worst spirit of faction. All contrivances by ballot we know from experience to be vain and childish to prevent a discovery of inclinations. Where they do produce concealment they also produce suspicion, and this is a still more harmful cause of partiality.

If the *parlements* had been preserved, instead of being dissolved at such a ruinous cost to the nation, they could have served in this new commonwealth in roughly the same way that the court and senate of Areopagus served in Athens; namely as one of the balances and correctives to the evils of a light and unjust democracy. Everyone knows that this tribunal was the great stay of that state; everyone knows how carefully it was upheld, and with what a religious awe it was consecrated. The *parlements* ·in France· were not wholly free from faction, I admit; but this evil was exterior and accidental, not an inevitable result of their constitution, which is what it must be in your new contrivance of elected tribunals with six-year terms. Several English writers commend the abolition of the old tribunals, supposing that they determined everything by bribery and corruption. But they have stood the test of monarchic and republican scrutiny. The court was well disposed to prove them to be corrupt when they were dissolved in 1771. Those who have again

dissolved them would have done the same if they could, but both inquisitions having failed, I conclude that gross pecuniary corruption must have been rare among them.

It would have been prudent, along with the *parlements*, to preserve their ancient power of critical commentary on all the decrees of the National Assembly, as they did upon those that passed in the time of the monarchy. This would be a means of squaring •the occasional decrees of a democracy to •some principles of general jurisprudence. The vice of the ancient democracies, and one cause of their ruin, was that they (like you) ruled by occasional decrees. This practice soon broke in on the tenor and consistency of the laws; it lessened the people's respect for them, and totally destroyed them in the end.

You have given the power of critical commentary—which in the time of the monarchy existed in the parliament of Paris—to your principal executive officer, whom you nonsensically insist on calling 'king'. This is the height of absurdity. You ought never to permit critical commentary from him who is to execute. This is to understand neither council nor execution, neither authority nor obedience. The person whom you call 'king' ought not to have this power, or he ought to have more. [In the preceding two paragraphs 'critical commentary' replaces Burke's 'remonstrance'.]

(iii) The judicature

[The '(iii)' in that heading refers back to the numbered list of topics on page 94]. Your present arrangement is strictly judicial. Instead of imitating your monarchy and seating your judges on a bench of independence, you aim to reduce them to the most blind obedience. As you have changed all things, you have invented new principles of order. You first appoint judges who (I suppose) are to determine according to law,

and then you let them know that you will eventually give them some law by which to determine. Any studies they have made (if they have made any) will be useless to them. But to fill the place of these studies they are to be sworn to obey all the rules, orders, and instructions they receive from the National Assembly. If they submit to these they leave no ground of law to the subject. They become complete and most dangerous instruments in the hands of the governing power which can wholly change the rules in the middle of a cause or in preparation for one. If these orders of the National Assembly come to be contrary to the will of the people, who locally choose judges, dreadful confusion must occur. For the judges owe their places to the local authority, and the commands they are sworn to obey come from those who have no share in their appointment. . . .

The Assembly promises to create a body of law that will be short, simple, clear, and so forth. That is, by their short laws they will leave much to the discretion of the judge, while they have exploded the authority of all the learning which could make judicial discretion (a perilous thing at best!) deserve to count as *sound* discretion.

Oddly, the administrative bodies are carefully exempted from the jurisdiction of these new tribunals. That is, the persons who ought to be the most entirely submitted to the laws are exempted from their power. Those who carry out public pecuniary trusts ought of all men to be the most strictly held to their duty. Given that you did not mean those administrative bodies to be real, sovereign, independent states, one would have thought that it must have been one of your first concerns to form an awe-inspiring tribunal—like your late *parlements*, or like our King's Bench—where all corporate officers could •obtain protection in the legal exercise of their functions, and would •find coercion if they trespassed against their legal duty. But the cause of the exemption is

plain. These administrative bodies are the great instruments of the present leaders in their march through democracy to oligarchy, so they must be put above the law. . . .

This establishment of judges still lacks something for its completion. It is to be crowned by a new tribunal. This is to be a grand state judicature, and it is to judge crimes committed against the nation, i.e. against the power of the Assembly. They seem to have been aiming at something like the high court of justice erected in England during the time of the great usurpation by Cromwell. As they have not yet finished this part of the scheme, it is impossible to form a right judgment on it. But if they don't take care to form it in a spirit very different from what has guided them in their proceedings relative to state offences, this tribunal—subservient to their inquisition, the 'Committee of Research'—will extinguish the last sparks of liberty in France and establish the most dreadful and arbitrary tyranny ever known in any nation. If they want to give this tribunal any appearance of liberty and justice, they must not send to it causes involving their own members; and they must move the seat of that tribunal out of the republic of Paris.

(iv) The army

Has more wisdom been displayed in the constitution of your army than what we find in your plan of judicature? The able arrangement of this part is harder and more demanding of skill and attention, not only as of great concern in itself but also—referring back to page 103—as the third cementing principle in the new body of republics that you call the French nation. It is not easy to foresee what that army may eventually become. You have voted a very large one, well equipped, at least fully equal to your apparent means of payment. But what is the principle of its discipline? or

whom is it to obey? You have got the wolf by the ears, and I wish you joy of the happy position in which you have chosen to place yourselves, and in which you are well positioned for a free deliberation concerning that army or concerning anything else.

The minister and secretary of state for the war department is M. de la Tour du Pin. This gentleman, like his colleagues in administration, is a most zealous assertor of the revolution, and an optimistic admirer of the new constitution that originated in that event. His statement of facts about the military of France is important not only because of his official and personal authority, but also because it clearly displays the actual condition of the army in France, and it throws light on the principles on which the Assembly proceeds in the administration of this critical object. It may enable us to form some judgment about how far we in Great Britain should imitate the military policy of France.

M. de la Tour du Pin, on the fourth of last June, comes to give an account of the state of his department as it exists under the auspices of the National Assembly. No man knows it so well; no man can express it better. Addressing himself to the National Assembly, he says:

'His Majesty has *this day* sent me to inform you of the multiplied disorders of which *every day* he receives the most distressing intelligence. The army threatens to fall into the most turbulent anarchy. Entire regiments have dared to violate the respect due to •the laws, •the king, •the order established by your decrees, and •the oaths they have taken with the most awful solemnity. Compelled by my duty to inform you of these excesses, my heart bleeds when I consider who they are that have committed them. Those against whom it is not in my power to withhold the most grievous complaints are a part of that very soldiery

which to this day have been so full of honour and loyalty, and with whom I have lived as comrade and friend for fifty years.

‘What incomprehensible spirit of delirium and delusion has all at once led them astray? While you are tirelessly establishing uniformity in the empire, and molding the whole into one coherent and consistent body, while the French are taught by you the respect that the laws owe to the rights of man and that the citizens owe to the laws, the administration of the army presents nothing but disturbance and confusion. I see in more than one corps the bonds of discipline relaxed or broken; the most unheard-of pretensions avowed directly and without any disguise; the ordinances without force; the chiefs without authority; the military chest and the colours carried off; the authority of the king himself proudly defied; the officers despised, degraded, threatened, driven away, and some of them prisoners in the midst of their corps, dragging on a precarious life in the bosom of disgust and humiliation. . . . The commandants of places have had their throats cut, under the eyes and almost in the arms of their own soldiers.

‘These evils are great; but they are not the worst consequences that can come from such military insurrections. Sooner or later they may menace the nation itself. *The nature of things requires* that the army should never act but as *an instrument*. The moment it sets itself up as a deliberative body and acts according to its own resolutions, *the government, be it what it may, will immediately degenerate into a military democracy*—a species of political monster that has always ended by devouring those who produced it.

‘After all this, who can not be alarmed at the irregular consultations and turbulent committees formed in some regiments by the common soldiers and non-commissioned officers without the knowledge of their superiors and even in contempt of their authority. Not that the agreement of those superiors could give authority to such monstrous democratic assemblies.’

It is not necessary to add much to this finished picture—finished as far as its canvas admits, but not (I think) taking in the whole of the nature and complexity of the disorders of this military democracy which, as the minister of war truly and wisely observes, must be the true constitution of the state, whatever official label it is given. For though he informs the Assembly that the more considerable part of the army have not cast off their obedience and are still attached to their duty, travellers who have seen the corps whose conduct is the best observe in them •the absence of mutiny rather than •the existence of discipline.

I cannot help pausing here to reflect on this minister’s surprise over the excesses he relates. To him it seems quite inconceivable that the troops should depart from their ancient principles of loyalty and honour. Surely those he is speaking to know the causes of this only too well. They know the doctrines they have preached, the decrees they have passed, the practices they have permitted. The soldiers remember 6 October. They recollect the French guards. They have not forgotten the taking of the king’s castles in Paris and Marseilles, or the fact that the governors in both places were murdered with impunity. They do not abandon the principles of ‘the equality of men’ laid down so ostentatiously and laboriously. They cannot shut their eyes to the degradation of the whole nobility of France and the suppression of the very idea of a gentleman. The total abolition of titles and distinctions is not lost on them. But

M. de la Tour du Pin is astonished at their disloyalty when the doctors of the Assembly have taught them—along with all this—the respect due to laws. It is easy to judge which of the two sorts of lessons men with weapons in their hands are likely to learn! As for the authority of the king, we can learn from the minister himself that it is of no more consideration with these troops than it is with anyone else. ‘The king’, says he, ‘has over and over again repeated his orders to put a stop to these excesses; but in so terrible a crisis your (the Assembly’s) concurrence has become necessary to prevent the evils that menace the state. You unite to the force of the legislative power that of *opinion*, still more important.’ To be sure the army can have no opinion of the power or authority of the king. Perhaps the soldier has by this time learned that the Assembly itself does not enjoy much more liberty than that royal figure.

It is now to be seen what has been proposed in this exigency, one of the greatest that can happen in a state. The minister asks the Assembly to array itself in all its terrors and to call forth all its majesty. He desires that the grave and severe principles announced by them may give vigour to the king’s proclamation. [In the next sentence, ‘decimating’ a military unit is executing one tenth of its members, chosen at random.] After this we should have looked for civil and military courts, the breaking of some corps, the decimating of others, and all the terrible means which necessity has employed in such cases to stop the progress of the most terrible of all evils; particularly, one might expect that a serious inquiry would be made into the murder of commandants in the view of their soldiers. Not one word of all this or of anything like it! After being told that the soldiery trampled on the decrees of the Assembly promulgated by the king, the Assembly pass new decrees and authorise the king to make new proclamations. After the secretary at war had stated that the regiments

had paid no regard to oaths ‘taken with the most imposing solemnity’, they propose—what? More oaths! . . .

The means that have been used to prevent the mischiefs arising from conspiracies, irregular consultations, seditious committees, and monstrous democratic assemblies of the soldiers, and all the disorders arising from idleness, luxury, dissipation, and insubordination, are (I believe) the most astonishing that ever occurred to men, even in all the inventions of this prolific age. It is no less than this: the king has promulgated in circular letters to all the regiments his direct authority and encouragement that the various corps should join themselves with the clubs and confederations in the several municipalities, and mix with them in their feasts and civic entertainments! This jolly discipline, it seems, is to soften the ferocity of their minds, to reconcile them to their bottle companions of other descriptions, and to merge particular conspiracies in more general associations. That this remedy would be pleasing to the soldiers, as they are described by M. de la Tour du Pin, I can readily believe; and however mutinous they are otherwise I am sure they will dutifully submit themselves to *these* royal proclamations. But I question whether all this civic swearing, clubbing, and feasting would make them more disposed than they are at present to obey their officers, or teach them better to submit to the austere rules of military discipline. It will make them admirable citizens in the French manner, but not quite so good soldiers in any manner. We may well doubt whether the conversations at these good tables would improve their fitness for the role of mere ‘instruments’, which this veteran officer and statesman rightly says the nature of things always requires an army to be.

Concerning the likelihood of this improvement in discipline by the free conversation of the soldiers with municipal festive societies we may judge by the state of the

municipalities themselves, provided to us by the war minister in this very speech. The good disposition of certain regiments gives him good hopes of the success of his endeavours to restore order for the present, but he finds something cloudy with regard to the future. As to preventing the return of confusion, the administration (says he) cannot be answerable to you (the Assembly) for this as long as they see the municipalities claim for themselves an authority over the troops that your institutions have reserved wholly to the monarch. You have fixed the limits of the military authority and the municipal authority. You have limited the action you have permitted to the latter over the former to the right of requisition; neither the letter nor the spirit of your decrees ever authorised the commons in these municipalities to break the officers, to try them, to give orders to the soldiers, to drive them from the posts they had been ordered to guard, to stop them in their marches ordered by the king, or, in a word, to enslave the troops to the whims of each of the cities or even market towns through which they are to pass.

[Burke now attacks the dismissive attitude of the Assembly ('juvenile politicians') to age and experience ('a man of fifty years' wear and tear among mankind'). Then:]

The imbecility of any part of the puerile and pedantic system that they call a 'constitution' cannot be laid open without revealing the utter insufficiency and harmfulness of every other part that bears even the remotest relation to it. You cannot propose a remedy for the incompetence of the crown without displaying the feebleness of the Assembly. You cannot deliberate on the confusion of the army of the state without disclosing the worse disorders of the armed municipalities. . . . Read carefully the eloquent speech (such it is) of M. de la Tour du Pin. He attributes the salvation of the municipalities to the good behaviour of some of the troops. These troops are to preserve the well-disposed part of those

municipalities, which is confessed to be the weakest, from the pillage of the worst-disposed, which is the strongest. But the municipalities claim sovereignty and want to command the troops needed for their protection. Indeed they must command them or court them. Because of the demands of their situation and the republican powers they have obtained, the municipalities must relate to the military as

- masters, or
- servants, or
- confederates, or
- each in turn,

or they must make a jumble of all together, according to circumstances. What government is there to coerce the army except the municipality, or to coerce the municipality except the army? To preserve concord where authority is extinguished, at the risk of all consequences, the Assembly tries to cure the illnesses by the illnesses themselves: they hope to preserve themselves from a purely military democracy by giving the military a debauched interest in the municipal democracy.

Once the soldiers come to mix for any time in the municipal clubs, cabals, and confederacies, a magnetic attraction will draw them to the lowest and most desperate part, bringing with them their habits, affections, and sympathies. The military conspiracies, which are to be remedied by civic confederacies; the rebellious municipalities, which are to be made obedient by providing them with the means of seducing the very armies of the state that are to keep them in order; all these chimeras of a monstrous and portentous policy must worsen the confusion from which they have arisen. There must be blood. The lack of common judgment manifested in the construction of all their descriptions [see Glossary] of forces and in all their kinds of civil and judicial authorities will make it flow. Disorders may be quieted in one time

and in one part. They will break out in others, because the evil is radical and intrinsic. All these schemes of mixing mutinous soldiers with seditious citizens must further •weaken the military connection of soldiers with their officers, while •adding military and mutinous audacity to turbulent craftsmen and peasants. To secure a *real* army, the officer should be first and last in the eye of the soldier; first and last in his attention, observance, and esteem. ·In your ‘army’· it seems there are to be officers whose chief qualification is calmness and patience. They are to manage their troops by electioneering arts. They must conduct themselves as candidates, not as commanders. By such means power may be occasionally in their hands, so the authority by which they are to be nominated becomes of high importance.

Control of the army

It is not clear what you will finally do; and it does not matter much while the strange and contradictory relation between your army and all the parts of your republic, as well as the puzzled relation of those parts to each other and to the whole, remain as they are. You seem to have given the provisional nomination of the officers in the first instance to the king, subject to approval by the National Assembly. Men who have an interest to pursue are extremely good at discovering the true seat of power. They must soon perceive that those who can block appointments indefinitely are really appointing. So the officers must look to their intrigues in that Assembly as the only sure road to promotion. Yet by your new constitution they must *begin* their solicitation at court. This double negotiation for military rank seems to me likely to promote faction in the Assembly itself relating to this vast military patronage, and then to poison the corps of officers with factions of a nature still more dangerous to the

safety of government. . . .and destructive in the end to the efficiency of the army itself. If the system were designed for just that purpose it couldn’t have been better done. Officers who lose the promotions intended for them by the crown must become of a faction opposed to that of the Assembly that has rejected their claims, and must nourish in the heart of the army discontents against the ruling powers. On the other hand, officers who, by carrying their point through an interest in the Assembly feel themselves to be at best only second in the good will of the crown though first in that of the Assembly, must slight an authority that would not advance and could not retard their promotion. If to avoid these evils you decide that command and promotion are to be decided purely by seniority, you will have an army of formality; at the same time it will become more independent ·of any external control· and more of a military republic. . . . A king is not to be deposed by halves. If he is not everything in the command of an army, he is nothing. What is the effect of a power placed nominally in the hands of a ‘head’ of the army whom that army is not grateful to or afraid of? Such a figurehead is not fit for the administration of something that is of all things the most delicate, namely the supreme command of military men. They must be constrained. . . .by a real, vigorous, effective, decided, personal authority. The authority of the Assembly itself suffers by passing through such a debilitating channel as they have chosen. The army will not long look to an assembly that acts through false show and palpable imposition. They will not seriously yield obedience to a prisoner. They will either despise the pageant or pity the captive king. This relation of your army to the crown will, I think, become a serious dilemma in your politics.

There is also the question of whether an assembly like yours, even if it did have another sort of organ through

which to pass its orders, is fit for promoting the obedience and discipline of an army. It is known that armies have always given a very precarious and uncertain obedience to any senate or popular authority; and least of all will they yield it to an assembly that is to continue for only two years. The officers must totally lose the characteristic disposition of military men if they see with perfect submission and due admiration the dominance of orators; especially when they find that they have to pay court repeatedly to an endless series of those orators, whose military policy and command skills (if they have any) must be as uncertain as their duration is short. In the weakness of one kind of authority (·the king·) and the fluctuation of the other (·the Assembly·), the officers of an army will remain for some time mutinous and quarrelsome until some popular general who •understands the art of conciliating the soldiery and •possesses the true spirit of command draws the eyes of all men onto himself. Armies will obey him because of his personal qualities. There is no other way of securing military obedience in this state of things. But the moment that event happens, this person who really commands the army is your master—the master of your king, your Assembly, your whole republic. [This event did happen nine years later with the ascendancy of Napoleon Bonaparte.]

How did the Assembly get their present power over the army? Chiefly by seducing the soldiers away from their officers. They have begun by a most terrible operation. . . . They have destroyed the principle of obedience in the great, essential, critical link between the officer and the soldier, just where the chain of military subordination starts and on which the whole of that system depends. The soldier is told he is a citizen and has the rights of man and citizen. The right of a man, he is told, is to be his own governor and to be ruled only by those to whom he delegates that self-government. It is very natural for him to think that he ought most of all to

have his choice where he is to yield the greatest degree of obedience. So he will probably do systematically what he now does occasionally, namely exercise at least a negative in the choice of his officers. At present the officers are only *permitted* to have their positions, and only conditionally on their good behaviour. In fact there have been many cases where they were dismissed by their corps. Here is a second negative on the king's choice—one that is at least as effective as the Assembly's negative. The soldiers know already that the National Assembly has seriously considered whether they (the soldiers) ought to have the direct choice of all or some proportion of their officers. When such matters are under discussion it is not unreasonable to expect them to favour the opinion that is most favourable to their claims. They will not bear to be seen as the army of an imprisoned king while another army in the same country—one with whom they are to feast and confederate—is to be considered as the free army of a free constitution. They will cast their eyes on the other and more permanent army; I mean the municipal army. *That* corps, they well know, does actually elect its own officers. They may not be able to see the reason why they are not allowed to elect a Marquis de la Fayette (or whatever his new name is) of their own. If this election of a commander-in-chief is a part of 'the rights of men', why not of theirs? They see elective justices of peace, elective judges, elective curates, elective bishops, elective municipalities, and elective commanders of the Parisian army—why should they alone be excluded? Are the brave troops of France the only men in that nation who are not the fit judges of military merit and of the qualifications necessary for a commander-in-chief? Do they, because they are paid by the state, lose the rights of men? They are a part of that nation themselves and contribute to that pay. And is not the king, is not the National Assembly, and are not all who elect

the National Assembly, likewise paid? Instead of seeing all these forfeit their rights because they receive a salary, they see that in all these cases a salary is given for the exercise of those rights. . . .

Coercing the peasants

With a government such as yours everything depends on the army, for you have industriously destroyed all the opinions and prejudices and (as far as you could) all the instincts that support government. The moment any difference arises between your National Assembly and any part of the nation, you must resort to force, because nothing else is left to you—or rather you have left nothing else to yourselves. The report of your war minister tells you that the distribution of the army is in a great measure made with a view to internal coercion. You must rule by an army; and you have infused into that army, as well as into the whole body of the nation, principles which in time must disable you in the use you plan to make of it. The king is to call out troops to act against his people, when the world has been told—and the assertion still rings in our ears—that *troops ought not to fire on citizens*. The colonies claim for themselves an independent constitution and free trade; they must be constrained by troops. In what chapter of your code of the rights of men can they read that it is a part of the rights of men to have their commerce monopolised and restrained for the benefit of others? As the colonists rise on you, the Negroes rise on them. Troops again—massacre, torture, hanging! These are your rights of men! These are the fruits of metaphysical declarations wantonly made and shamefully retracted! Only the other day the farmers of land in one of your provinces refused to pay some sort of rent to the lord of the soil. In consequence of this, you decree

that the country people shall pay all rents and dues except the ones you have abolished as grievances; and you order the king to march troops against them if they refuse. You lay down metaphysical propositions which imply universal consequences, and then you try to limit logic by despotism. The leaders of the present system tell them of their rights, as men, to take fortresses, to murder guards, to seize kings without the least appearance of authority even from the Assembly. . . ., and yet these leaders order out the troops that have acted in these very disorders, to coerce those who judge by the principles and follow the examples that have been guaranteed by the leaders' own approval.

The leaders teach the people to abhor and reject all feudality as the barbarism of tyranny, and they tell them afterwards how much of that barbarous tyranny they are to put up with patiently. They are extravagant in throwing light on grievances, but the people find them to be extremely sparing when it comes to redress. [He goes into details in support of his claim that the revolution's system of 'land rents' is thoroughly unjust.]

The peasants are probably descendants of ancient proprietors, Romans or Gauls. But if they fail in any way in the titles they claim on the principles of antiquaries and lawyers, they retreat into the citadel of 'the rights of men'. There they find that men are equal; and the earth—the kind and even-handed mother of all—ought not to be monopolised to support the pride and luxury of men who by nature are •no better than themselves, and who if they don't labour for their bread are •worse. They find that by the laws of nature the occupant and subduer of the soil is its true proprietor; that there is no prescription [see Glossary] against nature; that any agreements made with the landlords during the time of 'slavery' are only the effect of duress and force; and that when the people re-entered into the rights of men those

agreements became as void as everything else that had been settled under the prevalence of the old feudal and aristocratic tyranny. They will tell you that they do not see how an idler with a hat and a national cockade is any different from an idler in a cowl or in a surplice. If you base the entitlement to rents on succession and **prescription**, they will tell you—from the speech of M. Camus, published for their information by the National Assembly—that things that are wrong at the outset cannot avail themselves of prescription; that the title of these lords was vicious in its origin; and that force is at least as bad as fraud. As for title by **succession**, they will tell you that the succession of those who have cultivated the soil is the true pedigree of property, and not rotten parchments and silly substitutions; and that the lords have enjoyed their usurpation too long. . . .

When the peasants give you back that coin of sophistical reasoning on which you have set your image and superscription, you dismiss it as counterfeit money and tell them in future you will pay them with French guards, and dragoons, and hussars. To punish them, you wield the second-hand authority of a king who is only the instrument of destroying, with no power to protect the people or himself. Through him it seems you will make yourselves obeyed. They answer:

'You have taught us that there are no gentlemen; which of your principles teach us to bow to kings whom we have not elected? We know without your teaching that lands were given for the support of feudal dignities, feudal titles, and feudal offices. When you took down the cause as a grievance, why should the more grievous effect remain? As there are now no hereditary honours and no distinguished families, why are we taxed to maintain what you tell us ought not to exist? You have sent down our old aristocratic landlords as nothing but *extractors* under your authority. Have you tried to make these your rent-gatherers worthy of our respect?

No. You have sent them to us with their arms reversed, their shields broken, their impresses defaced—so unfeathered, degraded, and metamorphosed that we no longer know them. They are strangers to us. They do not even go by the names of our former lords. Physically they may be the same men, though we are not quite sure of that, on your new philosophical doctrines of personal identity. In all other respects they are totally changed. We do not see why we don't have as much right to refuse them their rents as you have to cancel all their honours, titles, and distinctions. We never commissioned you to do that; it is one of the many instances of your assumption of undelegated power. We see the burghers of Paris—through their clubs, mobs, and national guards—directing you at their pleasure, and giving to you as law something which under your authority is passed on as law to us. Through you these burghers dispose of the lives and fortunes of us all. Why should not you attend as much to the desires of the working farmer with regard to our rent (by which we are seriously affected) as you do to the demands of these insolent townspeople with regard to distinctions and titles of honour (by which neither they nor we are affected at all)? But we find you paying more regard to their fancies than to our necessities. Paying tribute to his equals—is *that* among the rights of man? Before this measure of yours, we might have thought we were not perfectly equal. We might have entertained some old, habitual, unmeaning bias in favour of those landlords; but you have wanted to destroy all respect to them—why else would you have made the law that degrades them? You have forbidden us to treat them with any of the old formalities of respect, and now you send troops to sabre and bayonet us into a submission to fear and force, which you did not allow us to yield to the mild authority of opinion.'

The basis for some of these arguments is horrid and ridiculous to all rational ears, but to the politicians of metaphysics who have opened schools for sophistry and made establishments for anarchy it is solid and conclusive. It is obvious that the leaders in the Assembly would not on moral grounds have had the least scruple about cancelling the rents along with the title and family ensigns. Doing that would be following the principle of their reasonings and completing the analogy of their conduct. But they had newly acquired by confiscation a great body of landed property. They had this commodity at market; and the market would have been wholly destroyed if they were to permit •the farmers to riot in the speculations with which they so freely intoxicated •themselves. The only security which property enjoys in any one of its descriptions is from the interests of their rapacity with regard to some other. [That sentence is exactly as Burke wrote it.] They have left nothing but their own arbitrary pleasure to determine what property is to be protected and what subverted.

Nor have they left any principle by which any of their municipalities can be bound to obedience, or even conscientiously obliged not to separate from the whole to •become independent or •connect itself with some other state. The people of Lyons, it seems, recently refused to pay taxes. Why should they not? What lawful authority is there left to demand them? The king imposed some of them. The old states, methodised by orders, settled the more ancient taxes. They may say to the Assembly:

‘Who are you, who are not our kings or states that we have elected, and do not proceed on the basis of principles on which we have elected you?
And who are we, who see the taxes that you have ordered to be paid, wholly rejected and that act of disobedience afterwards ratified by yourselves—who

are we to •have no say in what taxes we ought or ought not to pay, and to •be refused the powers whose validity you have approved in others?’

To this the answer is *We will send troops!* This last reason of kings is always the first with your Assembly. This military aid may serve for a time, while the impression of the increase of pay remains and the vanity of being umpires in all disputes is flattered. But this weapon—the army—will snap short, unfaithful to the hand that employs it. The Assembly keep a school where, systematically and with unremitting perseverance, they teach principles and form regulations destructive to all spirit of subordination, civil and military—and then they expect to hold an anarchic people in obedience by means of an anarchic army.

This national army, according to the new policy, is to be counter-balanced by the municipal army. The latter, considered purely in itself, has a constitution that is much simpler and in every respect less objectionable than that of the national army. It is a mere democratic body, unconnected with the crown or the kingdom; armed and trained and officered at the pleasure of the districts to which the corps severally belong; and the personal service of the individuals who compose it, or the payment in lieu of personal service, is directed by the same authority. Nothing is more uniform. But if it is considered in any relation to the crown, to the National Assembly, to the public tribunals, or to the national army, or considered in a view to any coherence or connection between its parts, it seems a monster that can hardly fail to terminate its confused movements in some great national calamity. . . .

(v) The revolution's handling of revenue

Having concluded my few remarks on the constitution of **(i)** the supreme power, **(ii)** the executive, **(iii)** the judicature, **(iv)** the military, and on the reciprocal relations of all these establishments, I shall say something about the ability shown by your legislators with regard to **(v)** the revenue.

The proceedings in relation to this matter show even fewer traces of political judgment or financial resource. When the states [see Glossary] met, it seemed that the great objective was to improve the system of revenue, to enlarge its collection, to cleanse it of oppression and vexation, and to establish it on the most solid footing. There were great expectations about that throughout Europe. It was by this grand arrangement that France was to stand or fall; and it became (very properly, in my opinion) the test by which the skill and patriotism of those who ruled in that Assembly would be tried. The revenue of the state is the state. In effect, everything depends on it, whether for support or for reformation. The dignity of every occupation wholly depends on the quantity and kind of virtue that can be exerted in it. All great qualities of the mind that operate in public, and are not merely suffering and passive, require force for their display; . . .so the revenue, which is the spring of all power, becomes in its administration the sphere of every active virtue. Public virtue is of a magnificent and splendid nature, instituted for great things and dealing with great concerns; so it requires abundant scope and room, and cannot spread and grow under confinement and in tightened, narrow, and sordid circumstances. It is only through the revenue that the body politic can act in its true genius and character, and therefore it will display just as much of •its collective virtue, and of the virtue of those who move it and are (as it were) its life and guiding principle, as it has •a just revenue. It is

from the revenue that magnanimity, liberality, beneficence, fortitude, providence, and the tutelary protection of all good arts derive their food and the growth of their organs. And continence, self-denial, labour, vigilance, frugality, and whatever else there is in which the mind shows itself above mere appetite, are nowhere more in their proper element than in the provision and distribution of public wealth. So it is not without reason that the science of theoretical and practical finance, which must call upon so many auxiliary branches of knowledge, stands high in the estimation not only of the ordinary sort but of the wisest and best men; and as this science has grown with the progress of its object, the prosperity and improvement of nations has generally increased with the increase of their revenues; and they will both continue to grow and flourish as long as the balance between •what is left to strengthen the efforts of individuals and •what is collected for the common efforts of the state is properly maintained, with the two being closely related to one another. And perhaps it may be owing to the size of revenues and the urgency of state necessities that old abuses in the constitution of finances are discovered and their true nature and rational theory comes to be more perfectly understood; because a smaller revenue might have been more distressing in one period than a far greater one is found to be in another, even if the public/private proportion remained the same. In this state of things, the French Assembly found something in their revenues to preserve, secure, and wisely administer, as well as something to cancel and alter. Though their proud assumption might justify the severest tests, I shan't hold them to models of ideal perfection, and will judge them only on the basis of what is the plain obvious duty of a common finance minister.

The objects of a financier are, then, to secure an ample revenue, to impose it with judgment and equality, to employ

it economically, and when necessary to make use of credit, to secure its foundations in that instance and always by the clearness and candour of his proceedings, the exactness of his calculations and the solidity of his funds. With this in mind let us take a short and distinct view of the merits and abilities of those in the National Assembly who have undertaken the management of this arduous concern. I find in a report by M. Vernier from the committee of finances dated 2 August of last year that the amount of the national revenue as compared with its product before the Revolution, far from having increased in their hands, was lessened by a sum equal to £8,000,000 sterling, a reduction of considerably more than 30%.

If this is the result of great ability, never surely was ability displayed in a more distinguished manner or with so powerful an effect. No common folly, no everyday incapacity, no ordinary official negligence, even no official crime, no corruption, no peculation, hardly any direct hostility which we have seen in the modern world could in so short a time have made so complete an overthrow of the finances and, with them, of the strength of a great kingdom. . . .

The salt monopoly

As soon as the Assembly met, the sophisters and declaimers began by decrying the previous constitution of the revenue in many of its most essential branches, such as the public monopoly of salt. They accused this, as truly as unwisely [Burke's phrase], with being badly designed, oppressive, and partial. They were not satisfied with saying this in speeches introducing some plan of reform; they declared it in a solemn resolution, as it were judicially passing sentence on the monopoly; and they dispersed this sentence throughout the nation. At the time of this decree, they equally solemnly

ordered the same absurd, oppressive, and partial tax to be paid until they could find a revenue to replace it. The consequence was inevitable. The provinces that had always been exempted from this salt monopoly—some of them charged with other perhaps equivalent contributions—were totally disinclined to bear any part of the burden. . . . As for the Assembly, occupied as it was with declaring and violating the rights of men, and arranging for general confusion, it had neither leisure nor capacity to contrive, nor authority to enforce, any plan of any kind for replacing the tax or equalising it, or compensating the provinces, or conducting their minds to any scheme of accommodation with districts that were to be relieved.

The people of the salt provinces, impatient under taxes, damned by the authority that had directed their payment, very soon found their patience exhausted. They thought themselves to be as skillful in demolition as the Assembly could be. They relieved themselves by throwing off the whole burden. Animated by this example, each district, or part of a district—judging of its own grievance by its own feeling, and of its remedy by its own opinion—did as it pleased with other taxes.

Other revenue attempts

[In this paragraph '(un)equal(ity)' means '(un)fair(ness)'.] Now let us see how they have conducted themselves in designing equal impositions that are •proportioned to the means of the citizens and •the least likely to lean heavily on the active capital at work in generating the private wealth from which the public fortune must be derived. In allowing various districts, and various individuals in each district, to decide what part of the old revenue to withhold, they were introducing—instead of better principles of equality—a new inequality

of the most oppressive kind. Payments were regulated by dispositions. The parts of the kingdom that were the most submissive, the most orderly, or the most well-disposed towards the commonwealth bore the whole burden of the state. Nothing turns out to be as oppressive and unjust as a feeble government. To fill up all the deficiencies in the old impositions and the new deficiencies of every kind that were to be expected—what remained to a state without authority? The National Assembly called for *voluntary benevolence*: for a quarter of each citizen's income, to be estimated on the honour of the paying citizen. What they obtained in this way. . . . was far from enough to meet their real needs, and even further from their foolish expectations. Rational people would have hoped for little from this *tax disguised as benevolence*— a tax weak, ineffective, and unequal; a tax by which luxury, avarice, and selfishness were screened, and the load thrown on productive capital, on integrity, generosity, and public spirit; a tax of regulation on virtue. At length the mask is thrown off, and they are now trying (with little success) to exact their benevolence by force.

This benevolence, the rickety offspring of weakness, was to be supported by another resource, the twin brother of the same prolific imbecility: the failure of the patriotic •contribution was to be made up for by patriotic •donations. John Doe was to become security for Richard Roe. By this scheme they took things that were worth a lot to the giver and of comparatively small value to the receiver; they ruined a number of trades; they pillaged the crown of its ornaments, the churches of their plate, and the people of their personal decorations. The invention of these juvenile pretenders to liberty was really just a servile imitation of one of the poorest resources of senile despotism. [Burke refers to attempts by Louis XIV and then by Louis XV to get revenue by asking citizens to donate their silverware to be melted down to make

coins. Neither attempt had much success. After making elaborate fun of the Assembly's resorting to 'these toys and playthings of finance', he continues:] Whatever virtue there may be in these devices, it is obvious that neither the patriotic gifts nor the patriotic contribution can ever again be resorted to. The resources of public folly are soon exhausted. Indeed, their whole scheme of revenue is to make somehow an appearance of a full reservoir for the hour, while cutting off the springs and living fountains of permanent supply. M. Necker's recent account was clearly meant to be favourable. He gives a flattering view of the means of getting through the year, but he naturally expresses some anxiety concerning the following year. Instead of entering into the grounds of this anxiety in order to prevent the prognosticated evil by a proper foresight, the president of the Assembly gives M. Necker a sort of friendly reprimand.

It is impossible to say for sure anything about their other schemes of taxation, because they have not yet been implemented; but nobody could think that they will fill up any perceptible part of the hole that the Assembly's incompetence has made in their revenues. At present the state of their treasury sinks every day in cash [i.e. in metal money], and swells in fictitious representation [i.e. in paper money]. When so little within or without is now found but paper, which represents not affluence but poverty, and is the creature not of credit but of power, they imagine that our flourishing state in England is due to that bank-paper. In fact, the bank-paper is due to

- the flourishing condition of our commerce,
- the solidity of our credit, and
- the total exclusion of all idea of *power* from any part of the transaction.

•As regards the third of those•, they forget that in England not one shilling of paper money of any description is received

except by choice; that the whole mass of paper money has had its origin in cash actually deposited; and that if one wants to convert any of it back into cash, this can be done in an instant and without the smallest loss. Our paper is of value in commerce because it has no standing in law. . . . A creditor who is owed twenty shillings can legally refuse all the paper of the Bank of England. Nor is there among us any public security that is enforced by authority. It is in fact easy to show that our paper wealth, instead of lessening the real coin, has a tendency to increase it; that instead of being a substitute for money, it only facilitates its entry, its exit, and its circulation; that it is the symbol of prosperity and not the badge of distress. . . .

'Well! but a lessening of extravagant expenses, and the economy that has been introduced by the virtuous and intelligent Assembly, make up for the losses sustained in the receipt of revenue. In this at least they have fulfilled the duty of a financier.' Have those who say so looked at the expenses of the National Assembly itself, of the municipalities, of the city of Paris, of the increased pay of the two armies, of the new police, of the new judicatures? Have they even carefully compared the present pension list with the previous one? These politicians have been cruel, not economical. Comparing the expense of the former extravagant government in relation to its revenues with the expenses of this new system in relation to the state of its new treasury, I believe the present will be found to be incomparably more guilty.

Obtaining credit

It remains only to consider the proofs of financial ability provided by the present French managers when they have to raise supplies on credit. Here I am a little at a stand, because properly speaking they do not have any *credit*. The credit of

the previous government was indeed not the best, but they could always command money on some terms, not only in France but from most European countries where surplus capital had accumulated; and the credit of that government was improving daily. The establishment of a system of liberty would naturally be expected to give it new strength; and so it would have done if a system of liberty *had* been established. What offers has this government of so-called 'liberty' had from Holland, from Hamburg, from Switzerland, from Genoa, from England for a dealing in their paper? Why should these nations of commerce and economy enter into any pecuniary [see Glossary] dealings with a people who attempt to reverse the very nature of things, a people among whom they see the debtor prescribing at the point of the bayonet how he is to repay the creditor, discharging one of his engagements with another, turning his very poverty into his resource and paying his interest with his rags?

Their fanatical confidence in the omnipotence of church plunder has induced these philosophers to overlook all care of the public estate. . . . These philosophical financiers expect this universal medicine made of church-extract to cure all the evils of the state. These gentlemen perhaps do not believe much the miracles of piety, but they certainly have an undoubting faith in the prodigies of sacrilege.

- Is there a debt that presses them?—Issue *assignats*.
- Are compensations to be made. . . .to those whom they have robbed of their freehold in their office, or expelled from their profession?—*Assignats*.
- Is a fleet to be fitted out?—*Assignats*.

If £16,000,000 worth of these *assignats*, forced on the people, leave the state's needs as urgent as ever, 'Issue £30,000,000 of *assignats*', says one; 'Issue £80,000,000 more of *assignats*', says another. The only difference among their financial factions is on what quantity of *assignats* is to be imposed

on the suffering public. They are all professors of *assignats*. Even those whose natural good sense and knowledge of commerce, not obliterated by philosophy, provide decisive arguments against this delusion conclude their arguments by proposing the issuing of *assignats*. I suppose they must talk of ‘*assignats*’, as no other language would be understood. All experience of their inefficiency does not in the least discourage them. Are the old *assignats* depreciated at market?—What is the remedy? Issue new *assignats*. . . .

Who but the most desperate adventurers in philosophy and finance could have thought of destroying the settled revenue of the state, the sole security for the public credit, in the hope of rebuilding it with the materials of confiscated property? If, however, an excessive zeal for the state should have led a pious and venerable prelate. . . .to pillage his own order and—for the good of the church and people—to take on himself the place of grand financier of confiscation and comptroller-general of sacrilege, he and his coadjutors were in my opinion obliged to show by their subsequent conduct that they knew something of the office they assumed. When they had resolved to appropriate to the public treasury a certain portion of the landed property of their conquered country, it was their business to render their bank a real fund of credit, as far as such a bank was capable of becoming so. [This paragraph is savagely sarcastic: ‘a pious and venerable prelate’ for Talleyrand, bishop of Autun; ‘grand financier of confiscation and comptroller-general of sacrilege’ for his official position in the government; ‘their conquered country’ for France]

Establishing a current circulating credit on any land-bank has always proved difficult and has commonly ended in bankruptcy. But when the Assembly were led through a contempt of moral principles to a defiance of economic ones, it might have been expected at least to do everything it could to lessen this difficulty, to lighten this bankruptcy. It might

be expected that to render your land-bank tolerable, every means would be adopted that could display openness and candour in the statement of the security—everything that could aid the recovery of the demand. The most favourable way of looking at your situation likens it to that of a man with a large landed estate that he wanted to dispose of for the discharge of a debt and the supply of certain services. Not being able instantly to sell, you wanted to mortgage. What would a man with fair intentions and a commonly clear understanding do in such circumstances? Ought he not first to ascertain the gross value of the estate, the costs of its management and disposition, the encumbrances (perpetual and temporary) of all kinds that affect it, and then—settling a net surplus—calculate the fair value of the security? When that surplus (the only security to the creditor) had been clearly ascertained and properly vested in the hands of trustees, then he would indicate the parcels of land to be sold, and the time and conditions of sale; after this he could if he chose admit the public creditor to subscribe his stock into this new fund, or he might receive proposals for an *assignat* from private individuals who would advance money to purchase this sort of security.

This would be to proceed like men of business, methodically and rationally, and on the only principles of public and private credit that there are. The dealer would then know exactly what he purchased; and the only doubt that could remain in his mind would be the dread of the resumption of the spoil, which one day might be made (perhaps with an addition of punishment) from the sacrilegious grip of those execrable wretches who could become purchasers at the auction of their innocent fellow citizens.

An open and exact statement of the clear value of the property and of the time, the circumstances, and the place of sale were all necessary to efface as much as possible

the stigma that has hitherto been branded on every kind of land-bank. It was also necessary, on account of the pledge of faith they had given, that their future fidelity in a slippery concern might be established by their adherence to their first engagement. When they had finally determined on a state resource from church plunder, they came on 14.iv.1790 to a solemn resolution on the subject, and promised their country 'that in the statement of the public charges for each year, there should be brought to account a sum sufficient for defraying the expenses of the Roman Catholic religion, the support of the ministers at the altars, the relief of the poor, the pensions to the ecclesiastics of both sexes (secular as well as regular), so that the estates and goods that are at the disposal of the nation may be freed from all charges and employed by the legislative body to the great and most pressing needs of the state'. They further engaged, on the same day, that the sum necessary for the year 1791 would be forthwith determined.

In this resolution they admit it to be their duty to show clearly the expense of the above objects which they had earlier promised would be the first to be provided for. They admit that they ought to show the estate clear and disengaged from all charges, and that they should show it immediately. Have they done this immediately, or at any time? Have they ever provided a rent-roll of the immovable estates, or given an inventory of the movable effects that they confiscate to their *assignats*? How can they fulfill their engagements of holding out to public service 'an estate freed from all charges' without authenticating the value of the estate or the amount of the charges? I leave it to their English admirers to answer! Instantly on this assurance, before taking a single step toward making it good, they issue. . . .£16,000,000. This was manly [see Glossary]. Who, after this masterly stroke, can doubt of their abilities in finance? 'But then, before any

other emission of these financial indulgences, they took care at least to make good their original promise!' —If such an estimate has been made either of the value of the estate or the amount of the encumbrances, it has escaped me.

At length they have spoken out, fully revealing their abominable fraud in holding out the church lands as a security for any debts or any service whatsoever. They rob only to enable them to cheat, but in a very short time they defeat the purposes of the robbery *and* the fraud by making out accounts for other purposes that blow up their whole apparatus of force and of deception. I am obliged to M. de Calonne for his reference to the document that proves this extraordinary fact; it had somehow escaped me. Indeed it was not necessary to make out my assertion as to the breach of faith on the declaration of the 14.iv.1790. By a report of their committee it now appears that the charge of keeping up the reduced ecclesiastical establishments and other expenses attendant on religion, and maintaining the religious of both sexes, retained or pensioned, and the other concomitant expenses of the same nature which they have brought on themselves by •this convulsion in property, is £2,000,000 sterling greater, annually, than the income of the estates acquired by •it; not to mention a debt of £7,000,000 and upwards. These are the calculating powers of imposture! This is the finance of philosophy! This is the result of all the delusions held out to engage a miserable people in rebellion, murder, and sacrilege, and to make them prompt and zealous instruments in the ruin of their country!. . . .

[Now a paragraph setting out some of the other expenses that the Assembly has not taken into account. Then:]

But it is unnecessary to dwell on these obvious kinds of indebtedness. Have they made any clear statement of how •the whole of the general and municipal establishments of all sorts compares with •the regular income by revenue? Every

deficiency in the former becomes a charge on the confiscated estate before the creditor can plant his cabbages on an acre of church property. This confiscation is the only prop to keep the whole state from tumbling to the ground. In this situation they have purposely covered with a thick fog everything that they ought to have industriously cleared; and then, blindfold themselves, they drive by the point of the bayonets their slaves, blindfolded indeed no worse than their lords, to take their fictions for currencies and to swallow down paper pills at the rate of £34,000,000 sterling per dose. Then they proudly lay claim to future credit on the basis of the failure of all their past engagements, and at a time when it is clear (if in such a matter anything can be clear) that the surplus estates will never answer even the first of their mortgages, I mean that of the £16,000,000 sterling of *assignats*. In all this procedure I can discern neither the solid sense of plain dealing nor the subtle dexterity of ingenious fraud. The objections within the Assembly to opening the floodgates to this inundation of fraud are unanswered, but they are thoroughly refuted by a hundred thousand financiers in the street. These—i.e. the numbers of people—are the numbers by which the metaphysical arithmeticians compute. These are the grand calculations on which a philosophical public credit is founded in France. They cannot raise •supplies, but they can raise •mobs. . . .

Early this year the Assembly issued paper to the amount of £16,000,000 sterling; what must have been the state the Assembly has brought your affairs into when the relief provided by such a vast supply has hardly been perceptible? This paper also underwent an almost immediate depreciation of 5%, which soon came to about 7%. The effect of these *assignats* on the receipt of the revenue is remarkable. M. Necker found that the collectors of the revenue who received in coin paid the treasury in *assignats*. The collectors

made 7% by thus receiving in money and accounting in depreciated paper. It was easy to foresee that this was inevitable, but still it was embarrassing. M. Necker was obliged to buy gold and silver for the mint, which amounted to about £12,000 above the value of the commodity gained. (I believe that a considerable part of this happened in the market of London.) That minister believed that the state could not live on *assignats* alone, whatever their secret nutritive virtue might be; that some real silver was necessary, particularly for the satisfaction of those who, being equipped with weapons, were not likely to be notably patient when they saw that while an increase of pay was held out to them in real money it was to be fraudulently drawn back by depreciated paper. The minister, in this very natural distress, asked the Assembly to order the collectors to pay in coins what they had received in coins. It could not escape him that if the treasury paid 3% for the use of a currency which should be returned 7% worse than the minister issued it, such a dealing could not do much to enrich the public! The Assembly took no notice of his recommendation. They were in this dilemma: if they continued to receive the *assignats*, cash would become an alien to their treasury; if the treasury refused those paper trinkets or discountenanced them to any degree, they would destroy the credit of their sole resource. They seem then to have made their option, and to have given some sort of credit to their paper by taking it themselves; at the same time in their speeches they made a swaggering declaration. . . .that there is no difference in value between metallic money and their *assignats*. This was a good, stout, proof article of faith, pronounced under an anathema by the venerable fathers of this philosophical synod. . . .

[Burke devotes about two more pages to details about the financial ruin of France, ending with some remarks about the bad state of affairs in Paris. Then:]

The cost of maintaining Paris

This is the Paris on whose nourishment such immense sums, drawn from the vitals of all France, have been spent during the past year. As long as Paris stands in the place of ancient Rome, so long she will be maintained by the subject provinces. It is an evil that inevitably accompanies the dominion of sovereign democratic republics. As it happened in Rome, it may survive the republican domination that gave rise to it. In that case despotism itself must submit to the vices of popularity.

Rome under her emperors combined the evils of both systems, and this unnatural combination was one great cause of her ruin.

It is a cruel and insolent imposition to tell the people that the dilapidation of their public estate is bringing them *relief*. Statesmen, before congratulating themselves on the 'relief' given to the people by the destruction of their revenue, ought first to have carefully thought about the answer to this:

Is it more advantageous to the people to **(i)** pay considerably and gain in proportion, or to **(ii)** be freed from all contributions and gain little or nothing?

My mind is made up to decide in favour of **(i)**. Experience is with me, and so are the best opinions, I believe. The fundamental part of the skill of a true politician is the ability to keep a balance between the subject's power of acquisition and what the state demands from him. The means of acquisition are prior in time and in arrangement. Good order is the foundation of all good things. To be enabled to acquire, the people must be tractable and obedient (not servile). The magistrate must have his reverence, the laws their authority. The body of the people must not find the principles of natural subordination artificially rooted out of their minds. They must respect the property that they

cannot partake of. They must work to obtain what by work can be obtained; and when they find, as they commonly do, that their success is not in proportion to the effort they have put in, they must be taught their consolation in the final proportions of eternal [here = 'divine'] justice. Whoever deprives them of this consolation deadens their industry and strikes at the root of all acquisition as of all conservation. Someone who does this is the cruel oppressor, the merciless enemy of the poor and wretched, at the same time that by his wicked speculations he exposes the fruits of successful industry and the accumulations of fortune to the plunder of the negligent, the disappointed, and the unprosperous.

Too many professional financiers are apt to see nothing in revenue but banks, circulations, annuities on lives, tontines, perpetual rents, and all the small wares of the shop. In a settled order of the state these things are not to be slighted and skill in them is to be respected. They are good, but only when they are affected by that settled order and are built on it. But when men think that these beggarly contrivances can supply a resource for the evils that result from breaking up the foundations of public order and causing or allowing the principles of property to be subverted, they will leave in the ruin of their country a melancholy and lasting monument of the effect of preposterous politics and presumptuous, short-sighted, narrow-minded 'wisdom'.

The effects of the incompetence shown by the popular leaders in all the great organs of the commonwealth are to be covered with the 'all-atoning name' of *liberty*. In some people I see great liberty indeed; in many, if not in most, I see an oppressive and degrading servitude. But what is liberty without wisdom and without virtue? It is the greatest of all possible evils; for it is folly, vice, and madness, untutored and unrestrained. Those who know what virtuous liberty is cannot bear to see liberty disgraced by incompetent

heads on account of their having high-sounding words in their mouths. . . . To **make a government** requires no great prudence. Settle the seat of power, teach obedience, and the work is done. To **give freedom** is even easier: there is no need to guide; it only requires letting go the reins. But to **form a free government**, i.e. to bring these opposite elements of restraint and liberty together into one consistent work, requires much thought, deep reflection, a sagacious, powerful, and combining mind. I do not find this in those who take the lead in the National Assembly. Perhaps they are not as miserably deficient as they appear. I rather believe it. If they were, it would put them below the common level of human understanding. But when the leaders choose to make themselves bidders at an auction of popularity, their talents in state-construction will be of no service. They will become flatterers instead of legislators, instruments of the people, not their guides. If any of them proposes a scheme of liberty, soberly limited and defined with proper qualifications, he will immediately be outbid by his competitors who will produce something more splendidly popular. Suspicions will be raised about his fidelity to his cause. Moderation will be branded as the virtue of cowards, and compromise as the prudence of traitors, until—hoping to preserve the credit that may enable him to temper and moderate on some occasions—the popular leader is obliged to become active in propagating doctrines and establishing powers that will later defeat any sober purpose he might eventually have aimed at.

Conclusion

But am I so unreasonable as to see nothing at all that deserves commendation in the tireless labours of this Assembly? I do not deny that some good things may have been done among the countless acts of violence and folly. Those who

destroy everything are sure to remove some grievance. Those who make everything new have a chance that they may establish something beneficial. To give them credit for what they have done with the authority they have usurped—to excuse them for the crimes by which that authority was acquired—it must appear that the same things could not have been accomplished without producing such a revolution. Most assuredly they *could*, because almost every one of their regulations that is not very ambiguous was either •a part of what the king voluntarily conceded at the meeting of the states or •contained in the concurrent instructions to the orders. Some usages have been abolished on just grounds, but they were such that if they had stayed as they were for ever they would have detracted little from the happiness and prosperity of any state. The improvements of the National Assembly are superficial, their errors fundamental.

I would prefer my countrymen to recommend to our French neighbours the example of the British constitution rather than taking them as models for the improvement of our own. In their constitution they have an invaluable treasure. They are not, I think, without some causes of anxiety and complaint, but these are due not to their constitution but to their own conduct. I think our happy situation is due to our constitution, but due to the whole of it and not to any part singly, due in a great measure to what we have left standing in our several reviews and reformations as well as to what we have altered or added. Our people will find employment enough for a truly patriotic, free, and independent spirit in guarding what they possess from violation. I would not exclude alteration, but even when I changed the constitution I would be doing this so as to preserve it. I would be led to my remedy by a great grievance. In this I would follow the example of our ancestors: I would make the repairs as nearly as possible

in the style of the building. The ruling principles of our forefathers in their most decided conduct included •politic caution, •guarded circumspection, and •moral rather than temperamental timidity. Not being illuminated by the light of which the gentlemen of France tell us they have such an abundant share, they acted under a strong impression of the ignorance and fallibility of mankind. He who had made them thus fallible rewarded them for attending to their nature in their conduct. Let us imitate their caution if we wish to deserve their fortune or to retain their bequests. Let us add, if we please, but let us preserve what they have left; and, standing on the firm ground of the British constitution, let us be satisfied to *wonder at* the aeronauts of France [Burke's phrase] rather than trying to *follow* them in their desperate flights.

I have told you candidly my sentiments. I think they are not likely to alter yours. I do not know that they ought. You are young; you cannot guide but must follow the fortune of your country. But hereafter they may be of some use to you, in some future form which your commonwealth may take. It can hardly remain in its present form; but before its final settlement it may be obliged to pass, as one of our poets [Addison] says, 'through great varieties of untried being', and

in all its transmigrations to be purified by fire and blood.

I have little to recommend my opinions but long observation and much impartiality. They come from one who has been no tool of power, no flatterer of greatness; and who in his last acts does not wish to belie the tenor of his life. They come from one almost the whole of whose public exertion has been a struggle for the liberty of others; from one in whose breast no lasting or vigorous anger has ever been kindled except by what he considered as tyranny; and who snatches from his share in the endeavours that are used by good men to discredit opulent oppression the hours he has employed on your affairs; and who in so doing persuades himself he has not departed from his usual office; they come from one who has little desire for—and no expectation of—honours, distinctions, and wealth; who has no contempt for fame, and no fear of obloquy; who shuns quarrels though he will risk voicing an opinion; from one who wishes to preserve consistency, but who would preserve consistency by varying his means to secure. . . .his end, and when the equipoise of the vessel in which he sails is endangered by overloading it on one side, is desirous of carrying the small weight of his reasons to the other side so as to preserve its balance.