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LETTER

TO THE

PEOPLE OF FRANCE,

AND THE

FRENCH ARMIES,

ON THE

EVENT OF THE 18th FRUCTIDOR—SEP. 4—

AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

BY THOMAS PAINE.

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TO

THE PEOPLE OF FRANCE,

AND TO

THE FRENCH ARMIES.

WHEN an extraordinary measure, not warranted by established constitutional rules, and justifiable only on the supreme law of absolute necessity, bursts suddenly upon us, we must, in order to form a true judgment thereon, carry our researches back to the times that preceded and occasioned it. Taking then the subject up, with respect to the event of the eighteenth of fructidor on this ground, I go to examine the state of things prior to that period. I begin with the establishment of the constitution of the year 3 of the French Republic.

A better *organized* constitution has never yet been devised by human wisdom. It is, in its organization, free from all the vices and defects to which other forms of government are more or less subject. I will speak first of the legislative body, because the legislature is, in the natural order of things, the first power: the executive is the first magistrate.

By arranging the legislative body into two divisions, as is done in the French constitution, the one (the council of five hundred) whose part it is to conceive and propose laws; the other, a council of ancients, to review, approve, or reject the laws proposed; all the security is given that can arise from coolness of reflection acting upon, or correcting the precipitancy or enthusiasm of conception and imagination. It is seldom that our first thought, even upon any subject, is sufficiently just.

The policy of renewing the legislature by a third part each year, though not entirely new, either in theory or practice, is, nevertheless, one of the modern improvements in the science of government. It prevents, on the one hand, that convulsion and precipitate change of measures, into which a nation might be surprized by the going out of the whole legislature at the same time, and the instantaneous election of a new one. On the other hand, it excludes that common interest from taking place, that might tempt a whole legislature, whose term of duration expired at once, to usurp the right of continuance. I go now to speak of the executive.

It is a principle uncontestable by reason, that each of the parts by which government is composed, should be so constructed as to be in perpetual maturity. We should laugh at the idea of a council of five hundred, or a council of ancients, or a parliament, or any national assembly, who should be all children in leading strings and in the cradle, or be all sick, insane, deaf, dumb, lame or blind at the same time; or be all upon crutches, tottering with age or infirmities. Any form of government that was so constructed, as to admit the possibility of such cases happening to a whole legislature, would justly be the ridicule of the world; and on a parity of reasoning, it is equally as ridiculous that the same cases should happen in that part of government

which is called the executive; yet this is the contemptible condition to which an executive is always subject, and which is often happening, when it is placed in an hereditary individual called a king. When that individual is in either of the cases before mentioned, the whole executive is in the same case; for himself is the whole. He is then (as an executive) the ridiculous picture of what a legislature would be, if all its members were in the same case. The one is a whole made up of parts, the other, a whole without parts; and any thing happening to the one (as a part or section of the government) is parallel to the same thing happening to the other.

As therefore an hereditary executive called a king is a perfect absurdity in itself, any attachment to it is equally as absurd. It is neither instinct or reason; and if this attachment is what is called royalism in France, then is a royalist inferior in character to every species of the animal world; for what can that being be, who acts neither by instinct nor by reason? Such a being merits rather our derision than our pity; and it is only when it assumes to act its folly, that it becomes capable of provoking republican indignation. In every other case it is too contemptible to excite anger. For my own part, when I contemplate the self-evident absurdity of the thing, I can scarcely permit myself to believe that there exists in the high-minded nation of France, such a mean and silly animal as a royalist.

As it required but a single glance of thought to see (as is before said) that all the parts of which government is composed, must be at all times in a state of full maturity, it was not possible that men acting under the influence of reason, could, in forming a constitution, admit an hereditary executive, any more than an hereditary legislature. I go therefore to examine the other cases.

In the first place (rejecting the hereditary system) shall the executive by election, be an *individual*, or a *plurality*.

An individual by election is almost as bad as the hereditary system, except that there is always a better chance of not having an idiot. But he will never be any thing more than a chief of a party, and none but those of that party will have access to him. He will have no person to consult with on a standing equal with himself, and consequently be deprived of the advantages arising from equal discussion. Those whom he admits in consultation, will be ministers of his own appointment, who, if they displease by their advice, must expect to be dismissed. The authority also is too great, and the business too complicated, to be intrusted to the ambition or the judgment of an individual; and besides these cases, the sudden change of measures that might follow by the going out of an individual executive, and the election of a new one, would hold the affairs of a nation in a state of perpetual uncertainty. We come then to the case of a plural executive.

It must be sufficiently plural, to give opportunity to discuss all the various subjects that in the course of national business may come before it; and yet not so much numerous as to endanger the necessary secrecy that certain cases, such as those of war, require.

Establishing then plurality as a principle, the only question is, What shall be the number of that plurality?

Three are too few either for the variety or the quantity of business. The constitution has adopted *five*; and experience has shewn, from the commencement of the constitution to the time of the election of the new legislative third, that this number of directors, when well chosen, is sufficient for all national

executive purposes; and therefore a greater number would be only an unnecessary expence. That the measures of the directory, during that period, were well concerted, is proved by their success; and their being well concerted shews they were well discussed; and therefore, that *five* is a sufficient number with respect to discussion; and on the other hand, the secret, whenever there was one (as in the case of the expedition to Ireland) was well kept, and therefore the number is not too great to endanger the necessary secrecy.

I have no magical partiality to any particular number, but whenever an observation can be drawn from the œconomy of nature, it is worth attending to; and the more so, as it has been customary to make comparisons between the body politic and the natural body. Following then this idea, we see that nature, in the construction of the human frame, has acted by the number *five*. There are nominally five senses. Had more been necessary, she would have given them. Each of the extremities also terminates in that number of fingers or toes, and we cannot conceive the usefulness or the want of more. It is also worth observing, that nature appears to have been studious in exploding *individuality* or the number *one*. She has not committed the preservation of any of the senses to a single organ. Seeing and hearing, the two principal senses, have double organs; so also has taste; for smelling, though a different modification, is the forerunner of taste; and as to feeling, it exists in every part of the body. If it should be objected that smelling is absolutely a distinct sense, and not a distinct modification, and that it has but one organ, the nostril, it may be remarked, that this sense is the most interior, the least necessary, and the easiest dispensed with, of all the senses. If then we take nature for our guide in constructing a government, we must, in the first place, explode *individuality*, or the number *one*, from all the upper-works of government at least; and as to *plurality*

ly, we may as well follow her method as invent another. This is done in constituting a directory of five members, though it is most probable the idea of copying nature did not occur at the time. The reason why the two councils are numerous is not from the necessity of their being so, on account of business, but because that every part of the republic shall find and feel itself in the national representation.

Next to the general principle of government by representation, the excellence of the French constitution consists in providing means to prevent that abuse of power that might arise by letting it remain too long in the same hands. This wise precaution pervades every part of the constitution. Not only the legislature is renewable by a third every year, but the president of each of the councils is renewable every month; and of the directory, one member each year, and its president every three months. Those who formed the constitution cannot be accused of having contrived for themselves. The constitution, in this respect, is as impartially constructed as if those who framed it were to die as soon as they had finished their work.

The only defect in the constitution is that of having narrowed the right of election; and it is, in a great measure, to this narrowing the right, that the last elections have not generally been good. My ancient colleagues will, I presume, pardon my saying this to day, when they recollect my arguments against this defect, at the time the constitution was discussed in the Convention.

I will close this part of the subject by remarking on one of the most vulgar and absurd sayings or dogmas that ever yet imposed itself upon the world, which is, "that a republic is fit only for a small country, and a monarchy for a large one." Ask those who lay this, their reasons why it is so, and they can give none.

Let us then examine the case.—If the quantity of knowledge in a government ought to be proportioned to the extent of a country, and the magnitude and variety of its affairs, it follows, as an undeniable result, that this absurd dogma is false, and that the reverse of it is true. As to what is called monarchy, if it be adaptable to any country, it can only be so to a small one, whose concerns are few, little complicated, and all within the comprehension of an individual. But when we come to a country of large extent, vast population, and whose affairs are great, numerous, and various, it is the representative republican system only, that can collect into the government the quantity of knowledge, necessary to govern to the best nation's advantage. Montesquieu, who was strongly inclined to republican government, sheltered himself under this absurd dogma; for he had always the Bastille before his eyes when he was speaking of republics, and therefore *pretended* not to write for France. Condorcet governed himself by the same caution, but it was caution only, for no sooner had he the opportunity of speaking fully out than he did it. When I say this of Condorcet, I know it as a fact. In a paper published in Paris, July 1792, entitled; “*The Republican, or the Defender of representative Government,*” is a piece signed *Thomas Paine*. That piece was concerted between Condorcet and myself. I wrote the original in English, and Condorcet translated it. The object of it was to expose the absurdity and falshood of the above mentioned dogma.

Having thus concisely glanced at the excellencies of the constitution, and the superiority of the representative system of government, over every other system (if any other can be called a system) I come to speak of the circumstances that have intervened between the time the constitution was established, and the event that took place on the 18th of trucidor of the present year.

Almost as suddenly as the morning light dissipates darkness, did the establishment of the coalition change the face of affairs in France. Security succeeded to terror, prosperity to distress, plenty to famine, and confidence increased as the days multiplied, until the coming of the new third. A series of victories, unequalled in the world, followed each other, almost too rapidly to be counted, and too numerous to be remembered. The coalition, every where defeated and confounded, crumbled away like a ball of duff in the hand of a giant. Every thing, during that period, was acted on such a mighty scale, that reality appeared a dream and truth outstript romance. It may figuratively be said, that the Rhine and the Rubicon (Germany and Italy) replied in triumphs to each other, and the echoing Alps prolonged the shout. I will not here dishonor a great description by noticing too much the English government. It is sufficient paradoxically to say, that in the magnitude of its littleness, it cringed, it intrigued, and sought protection in corruption.

Though the achievements of these days might give trophies to a nation and laurels to its heroes, they derive their full radiance of glory from the principle they inspired and the object they accomplished. Desolation, chains, and slavery had marked the progress of former wars; but to conquer for liberty had never been thought of. To receive the degrading submission of a distressed and subjugated people, and insultingly permit them to live, made the chief triumph of former conquerors; but to receive them with fraternity, to break their chains, to tell them they are free, and teach them to be so, make a new volume in the history of man.

Amidst those national honors, and when only two enemies remained, both of whom had solicited peace, and one of them had signed preliminaries, the election of the new third commenced. Every thing was made easy to them. All difficulties had been conquered be-

fore they arrived at the government. They came in the olive days of the revolution, and all they had to do was not to do mischief.

It was, however, not difficult to foresee that the elections would not be generally good. The horrid days of Robespierre were still remembered, and the gratitude due to those who had put an end to them was forgotten.

Thousands who by passive approbation during that tremendous scene, had experienced no suffering, assumed the merit of being the loudest against it. Their cowardice in not opposing it, became courage when it was over. They exclaimed against terrorism, as if they had been the heroes that overthrew it, and rendered themselves ridiculous by fantastically overacting moderation. The most noisy of this class, that I have met with, are those who suffered nothing. They became all things, at all times, to all men; till at last they laughed at principle. It was the real republicans who suffered most during the time of Robespierre. The persecution began upon them on the 31st of May, and ceased only by the exertions of the remnant that survived.

In such a confused state of things as preceded the late elections, the public mind was put into a condition of being easily deceived; and it was almost natural that the hypocrite would stand the best chance of being elected into the ~~say~~ third. Had those who, since their election, have thrown the public affairs into confusion by counter revolutionary measures, declared themselves before hand, they would have been denounced instead of being chosen. Deception was necessary to their success. The constitution obtained a full establishment; the revolution was considered as complete; and the war on the eve of termination. In such a situation, the mass of the people, fatigued by a long revolution, sought repose; and in their elections they looked out for quiet men. They unfortunately found hypocrites. Would

any of the primary assemblies have voted for a civil war? Certainly they would not. But the electoral assemblies of some departments have chosen men, whose measures, since their election, tended to no other end but to provoke it. Either, those electors have deceived their constituents of the primary assemblies, or they have been themselves deceived in the choice they made of deputies.

That there were some direct but secret conspirators in the new third, can scarcely admit of a doubt; but it is most reasonable to suppose, that a great part was seduced by the vanity of thinking they could do better, than those had done, whom they succeeded. Instead of trusting to experience, they attempted experiments. This counter-disposition prepared them to fall in with any measures contrary to former measures; and that without seeing, and probably without suspecting, the end to which they led.

No sooner were the members of the new third arrived at the seat of government, than expectation was excited to see how they would act. Their motions were watched by all parties; and it was impossible for them to steal a march unobserved. They had it in their power to do great good, or great mischief. A firm and manly conduct on their part, uniting with that of the directory and their colleagues, would have terminated the war. But the moment before them was not the moment of hesitation. He that hesitates in such situation is lost.

The first public act of the council of Five-Hundred was the election of Pichegru to the presidency of that council. He arrived at it by a very large majority, and the public voice was in his favor. I, among the rest, was one who rejoiced at it. But if the defection of Pichegru was at that time known to Coode, and consequently to Pitt, it may vary the cause that retarded

all negotiations for peace. They interpreted that election into a signal of a counter-revolution, and were waiting for it; and they mistook the respect shewn to Pichegru, founded on the supposition of his integrity, as a symptom of national revolt. Judging of things by their own foolish ideas of government, they ascribed appearances to causes between which there was no connection. Every thing on their part has been a comedy of errors, and the actors have been chased from the stage.

Two or three decades of the new sessions passed away without any thing very material taking place; but matters soon began to explain themselves. The first thing that struck the public mind was, that no more was heard of negotiations for peace, and that public business stood still. It was not the object of the conspirators there should be peace; but as it was necessary to conceal that object, the constitution was ransacked to find pretences for delays. In vain did the directory expose to them the state of the finances and the wants of the army. The committee, charged with that business, trifled away its time by a series of unproductive reports, and continued to sit only to produce more. Every thing necessary to be done was neglected, and every thing improper was attempted. Pichegrue occupied himself about forming a national guard for the councils; the suspicious signal of war. Camille Jordan, about priests and bells, and the emigrants, with whom he had associated during the two years he was in England. Willot and Delarue attacked the directory; their object was to displace some one of the directors, to get in another of their own. Their motions with respect to the age of Barras (who is as old as he wishes to be, and has been a little too old for them) were too obvious not to be seen through.

In this suspensive state of things the public mind, filled with apprehensions, became agitated, and with-

