

Why did successive attempts to reconcile the Revolution with a constitutional monarchy ultimately fail?

The three years in which Louis XVI remained in power after the summoning of the Estates-General saw great tension between the king and his subjects, both grappling with the new realities the Revolution brought. The constant change in personnel among the Revolutionary institutions - first Estates-General then National Assembly then Constituent Assembly, Legislative Assembly and finally for Louis the National Convention - meant that the idea of reconciling a constitutional monarchy with 'the Revolution' had completely different connotations to different people. Certainly the abolition of the monarchy was beyond the wildest dreams of the men who arrived in Versailles in May 1789. Likewise throughout the following years there were consistently attempts to complete the Revolution with the monarchy intact - although reduced in role. What was the Constitution of 1791 written for if it was not a way to change once and for all the normal legislative process and to allow government to work from its framework. The *monarchiens* of late 1789 argued for much the same sort of settlement as did the *Feuillants* two years later, and it was not for lack of supporters that the attempts to firmly integrate the monarchy into the new governmental settlement.

One of the more lasting suspicions among the Third Estate and its later successors was a fear that the Court party - of which the king was seen as a pawn - was constantly trying to defeat the necessary and as they saw it justified work of the Assembly. The king's own actions did nothing to dispel these fears, such as the *Séance Royale* of 20 June 1789 which appeared to jeopardise all the progressive hopes which the formulation of the *cahiers* had stirred up. On several other occasions royal actions such as the refusal to ratify the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the decrees of the session of the Assembly on 4 August 1789 again portrayed the king as an unthinking reactionary whose very power threatened the passing of popular legislation. Later measures such as the Civil Constitution of the Clergy were passed with visible reluctance, and most crucially of all, were openly repudiated in the document which Louis left behind him as he fled to Varennes. Thus Louis's political stance did not win the support of either the parliamentarians or indeed the interested mob in Paris. Personally as well, many of his actions alienated him from the people with whom as a limited monarch he would have had to co-operate. Bailly presciently said at Versailles that 'we are here by the will of the people and we will only leave our places at the point of a bayonet.'¹ The ominous troop-movements up to 14 July 1789 clearly showed that far from having confidence in the deliberations of the Assembly he had no intention of relinquishing any of his previously absolute powers. His sending of secret messages to Vienna and Madrid just after his enforced move to Paris repudiating all concessions since 15 July 1789 did nothing to engender trust, while in December 1790 he wrote to Frederick William of Prussia asking for 'a Congress of Europe backed with armed force' in order to re-establish his rights. On the other hand, Louis's natural sense of inertia prevented him from ever openly advocating counter-revolutionary measures, much to the annoyance of Artois, Provence and the other émigré nobles who awaited his signal. As Hampson points out, 'the Powers could scarcely intervene to liberate a monarch who repeatedly proclaimed his freedom of action and acceptance of the Revolution.'²

The king's inevitable links with the high-ranking émigré nobility massing on France's eastern borders did certainly constitute a real and lasting threat to the stability of the Revolution - and however this is defined the concept of a constitutional monarchy was a product of the Revolution. Marie Antoinette's intriguing with the Austrian ambassador Mercy was quite open

¹ Vovelle *La chute de la monarchie* p.121

² Hampson *A social interpretation of the French Revolution* p.103

and her marriage to Louis inevitably compromised his position. Although Louis had said: 'I no longer have any doubt as to the will of the people. And so I accept the constitution. I undertake to maintain it at home, to defend it against attack from abroad', his wife nevertheless felt able to say: 'It is for the Emperor to put to an end the French Revolution. Compromise has become impossible. Armed force has destroyed everything, and only armed force can repair it.'³ Louis's own words also had no effect whatsoever on the émigrés, with Artois writing to Louis on 10 September 1791 that he would assume he had succumbed to intimidation and would respect his 'real will' by disobeying his orders. In this way, the king found his position *vis à vis* the Assembly and Revolutionary institutions compromised by the émigré leadership using him as their excuse for threatening the country. This impression was reinforced by Louis's unwise veto over legislation of 30 October 1792 sequestering the property of émigré nobles. Therefore even though Louis had consistently refused to take part in Artois's counter-revolution, his credibility in this claim was slim. The attempted flight to Varennes further compromised this credibility since it not only firmly identified the king with the counter-revolution - and therefore deserting his role the 'king of the French' - but also was clearly an attempt to breach the Constitution by attempting to both leave the kingdom and place himself at the head of a foreign army. Although he had succeeded in neither of these illegal acts before his recapture at Varennes, he clearly could no longer justifiably claim to be the head of the nation.

It was by no means the case that the sole cause of royal-legislative tension throughout the years of 1789-92 came about due to the actions of the king and his ministers. In fact, much of the erosion of royal prestige and power came about despite the best efforts of the most important parliamentarians of the times. The *monarchien* party in the Constituent Assembly made a proposal on 11 September 1789 - for the king to have an absolute veto on legislation as well as the creation of an Upper House. That this was defeated was in large measure due to the abstention of much of the aristocratic party - the motion was defeated by 575 votes to 325 in favour of giving the king only a suspensive veto over legislation. In this instance, the aristocratic party themselves were responsible for tacitly abandoning the monarchy. The removal of the king from Versailles to the Tuileries in Paris was done over the heads of the Assembly - so much so that 300 deputies asked for their passports, although only 26 actually withdrew from the Assembly. Two years later at the start of the Legislative Assembly, 264 deputies defected from the Jacobin club to form the *Feuillants* - whose platform was substantially similar to the one outlined in 1789 by the *monarchiens* providing for a secure monarchy at the heart of French government. As one of their leaders, Barnave said on 15 July 1791: 'Are we going to finish the Revolution, or are we going to recommence it? Any step further would be a culpable and dangerous one; a step further towards liberty would be the destruction of royalty; a step further towards equality would be the destruction of property.'⁴ Clearly at this point in time, Barnave thought that appeals to the institution of royalty were held as sacred as that of property itself, which was the centrepiece of the Declaration of the Rights of Man itself.

On the other hand, the institutions of the Revolution created ample opportunity for successive erosions of royal jurisdiction, power and prestige. From the very moment that Dreux-Brézé said in the Estates-General that 'the assembled Nation does not receive orders'⁵ it became clear that many members of the Assembly looked at the figure of the king as an Aunt Sally to beat in order to further their own programmes. An example is that of the Girondins in the Legislative Assembly, whose enthusiasm for a foreign war against the Austrian-led émigrés contained a deeply republican twist. Madame Roland saw war as a purgative for the *ancien régime*, saying 'civil war will be a great school of public virtue. Peace will set us back... we can be regenerated only by

³ Vovelle *La chute de la monarchie* p.165

⁴ Vovelle *La chute de la monarchie* p.164

⁵ Vovelle *La chute de la monarchie* p.121

violence.⁶ Isnard likewise said to the Assembly 'Your policy should be aimed at forcing the victory of the one side. Caution is merely weakness...we must amputate the gangrened limb to save the rest of the body.'⁷ Even those Girondins who still saw the need for the king's presence remained convinced of the need for coercion of the king - and creating a severely limited monarchy. Brissot spoke to the Jacobin Club on 12 Dec 1791 with the words 'war will purge France of the vices of despotism. Do you wish at one blow to destroy the aristocracy, the refractory priests, the malcontents; destroy Coblenz. The head of the nation will then be forced to reign through the constitution.'⁸

This latter point also brings up a major issue, which is the fact that the position of the monarchy in society marked one of the issues which separated the various groups of the Left from each other, and could be used as a bargaining tool. 264 members of the Jacobin Club defected after the summoning of the Legislative Assembly in 1791 to form the *Feuillant* group - thus neatly dividing the Club over the issue of the monarchy's status in legislation. Divisions arose between the Assembly and Jacobin Club after Varennes between those petitioning for the deposition of the king, and those wishing to maintain the Constitution as it currently stood: yet on 17 Jul 1791 violence in Paris over this led to martial law being imposed and 50 people killed on the Champs-de-Mars. The Girondin and Montagnard groups of the Jacobin Club in July-August 1792 for instance shared almost every policy in common, yet viewed each other as possible counter-revolutionary thanks to their supporters on the issue of the monarchy: Girondin attacks on the émigré nobility and refractory clergy attempted to force the king to declare himself on one side or the other - while Montagnards noted Courtly support for fighting and assumed it was an aristocratic plot to enmesh France in a war which could overthrow the Revolution.

Perhaps the most decisive influence on the increasing difficulty of arranging a constitutional settlement to the role of the monarchy can be illustrated by the previous example of the violence on the Champs-de-Mars. The people of Paris had throughout the period of 1789-92 forced the pace of reforms in the status of the monarchy due to their own direct actions. On 14 July 1789 they had forced the king to retract his dismissals of his ministers; that summer *jacquerie* had forced the adoption of the 4th August decrees; on 5 October the mob had captured the king and dragged him to Paris; in 1791 they arrested him in Varennes; invaded the Tuileries on 20 June 1792 and again finally on 10 August 1792. Yet on all of these occasions, the actions of the people of Paris were wholly outside the control of the Assembly charged with formulating the Constitutional procedures. As Hampson says 'that the July Crisis of 1789 ended without widespread violence, that the king did not regard himself as estranged from his people and that the Assembly had not been identified with the revolt meant that appearances could be saved and a compromise possible'⁹ However, the mob in Paris never became under the full control of the Assembly, with the Commune of Paris taking over responsibility for the violence of 1792. It was therefore due to the direct action of radical leaders such as Marat to set the agenda for the monarchy's place in society - based primarily on the geographical proximity of the mob to both the king and to the Assembly. It is noticeable that other provincial towns - despite in many cases a higher percentage of *sans-culottes* - did not share anything like as much power over events. Mob violence also posed serious problems for the Assembly to deal with - and their treatment did tend to reinforce their own propertied prejudices: harsh on peasant violence in the countryside, they tended to be lenient on violence against royal officials e.g. admirals. Ferrières said 'the men of the Constituent Assembly, always suspicious of the king's sincerity, feared that if they checked these people too severely they would deprive themselves of the means of employing them when

⁶ Hampson *A social interpretation of the French Revolution* p.134

⁷ Hampson *A social interpretation of the French Revolution* p.134

⁸ Hampson *A social interpretation of the French Revolution*

⁹ Hampson *A social interpretation of the French Revolution* p.76

they should need to set them in motion. Hence this alternation of anarchy & order, of sedition and repression.¹⁰ In this way, the cause of legitimising a limited monarchy was often spurned in favour of contingency against a possible counter-revolutionary threat.

In conclusion, however, a great deal of the incompatibility between the Revolution and a constitutional monarchy came simply through the gradual increase in the power and competency of the Assembly itself. Events during the king's flight to Varennes provide a telling example. Despite leaving behind a document repudiating many acts of the Assembly which he had previously endorsed, Louis failed to gather aid from royalist supporters against the Assembly. Instead, ministers executed decrees from the Assembly without the customary royal signature; while the National Guard succeeded in mobilising without royal assent. In short, the episode showed that the monarchy was no longer indispensable to the smooth running of government. In these circumstances, it was no longer necessary for the Assembly to infuriate its supporters on the Left for no benefit, seeing the refusal of aristocracy and king to make reciprocal compromises. As a petition from the citizens of Puivert in January 1792 put it, 'we thought, after the decree suppressing the feudal régime, that we were as free in our property as in our persons; two years experience has shown that we are slaves. The *ci-devant* is only our creditor now, but he has exchanged the role of noble for that of an inexorable litigant; unless you help us, we are ruined.'¹¹ As the flight to Varennes had shown, there was no need to retain the king, and no political benefit in insisting on it. When the Parisian mob struck in August 1792, patience inside the Assembly and among Jacobins further afield with the monarchy had grown too thin.

¹⁰ Hampson *A social interpretation of the French Revolution* p.97

¹¹ Hampson *A social interpretation of the French Revolution* p.124