

# ADDRESS TO THE ESTATES GENERAL

Louis XVI (1754–1793), King of France (1774–1793)

23 June 1789

Gentlemen, I believed that I had done everything in my power for the good of my people when I had taken the resolution to call you together; when I had surmounted all the difficulties with which your convocation was surrounded; when I had gone half-way, so to speak, to meet the wishes of the nation by showing beforehand what I wished to do for its happiness.

It seemed as though you had only to finish my work, and the nation awaited with impatience the moment when, by the conjuncture of the beneficent views of its sovereign and the intelligent zeal of its representatives, it was going to enjoy the prosperity that this union procures for it.

The Estates General have been in session for nearly two months, and they have not yet been able to come to an understanding upon the preliminaries of their operations. A perfect intelligence ought to have been born from mere love of country, and a baneful division fills all minds with alarm. I wish to believe and I like to think that the French are not changed. But, to avoid reproaching any of you, I consider that the renewing of the Estates General after so long a term, the agitation which preceded it, the object of this convocation so different from that which brought your ancestors together, the limitations in their instructions, and many other circumstances were bound, necessarily, to induce opposition, debates, and exaggerated pretensions.

I owe it to the common good of my kingdom, I owe it to myself, to cause these baneful divisions to cease. It is with this resolution, gentlemen, that I assemble you again about me. It is as the common father of all my subjects, as the defender of the laws of my kingdom, that I come to trace again their true spirit and repress the attacks which have been aimed at them.

But, gentlemen, after having clearly established the respective rights of the different orders, I expect of the first two orders, with the love of country, I expect with their attachment for my person, I expect with the knowledge they have of the urgent evils of the state, that in affairs which concern the general good, they will be the first to propose a union of opinion and sentiment, which I regard as necessary in the actual crisis, which ought to effect the safety of the state.

## **Declaration Concerning the Present Session of the Estates General**

- I. The King wishes that the ancient distinction of the three orders of the state be preserved in its entirety as essentially linked to the constitution of his kingdom; that the deputies, freely elected by each of the three orders, forming three chambers, deliberating by order, and being able, with the approval of the sovereign, to agree to deliberate in common, can alone be considered as forming the body of the representatives of the nation. As a result, the King has declared null the resolutions passed by the deputies of the order of the third estate the 17<sup>th</sup> of this month, as well as those which have followed them, as illegal and unconstitutional.
- II. His Majesty declares valid all the credentials verified or to be verified in each chamber upon which there has not been raised nor will be raised any contest. His Majesty orders that these shall be communicated by each order respectively to the other two orders. As for the credentials which might be contested in each order, and upon which the parties interested would appeal, it will be enacted for the present session only of the Estates General as will be hereafter ordered.
- III. The King sets aside and annuls as anti-constitutional, contrary to the letters of convocation, and opposed to the interest of the state, the limitations of instructions which, by embarrassing the liberty of the deputies to the Estates General, would prevent them from adopting the forms of deliberation taken separately by order or in common by the distinct wish of the three orders.

- IV. If, contrary to the intention of the King, some of the deputies have taken the rash vow not to deviate from any form of deliberation whatever, His Majesty leaves it to their conscience to consider whether the provisions that he is going to present deviate from the letter or from the spirit of the promise that they may have taken.
- V. The King permits the deputies who believe that they are embarrassed by their instructions to ask their constituents for new credentials. But His Majesty enjoins them to remain in the Estates General while waiting, in order to be present at all the deliberations upon the pressing affairs of the state, and to give consultative advice there.
- VI. His Majesty declares that in the following sessions of the Estates General, he will never suffer the cahiers or the instructions to be considered as imperative. They should be only simple instructions confided to the conscience and free opinion of the deputies who may have been chosen.
- VII. His Majesty having exhorted the three orders, for the safety of the state, to unite themselves during this session of Estates General only, to deliberate in common upon the affairs of general utility, wishes to make his intentions known upon the manner of procedure. *Viz.*, there will be particularly excepted from the affairs which can be treated in common those that concern the ancient and constitutional rights of the three orders, the form of constitution to give the next Estates General, the feudal and seignorial rights, and the useful rights and honorary prerogatives of the two first orders.
- IX. The especial consent of the clergy will be necessary for all provisions which could interest religion, ecclesiastical discipline, the regime of the orders, and secular and regular bodies.
- X. The decisions reached by the three orders united upon the contested credentials, and upon which the interested parties would appeal to the Estates General, shall be reached by a majority vote. But, if two-thirds of the votes in one of the three orders protested against the deliberation of the assembly, the affair will be reported to the King to be definitely decided by His Majesty.
- XI. If, with the view of facilitating the re-union of the three orders, they desired that the propositions that shall have been considered in common should pass only by a majority of two-thirds of the votes, His Majesty is disposed to authorize this form.
- XII. The affairs which will have been decided in the assembly of the three orders united will be taken up again the next day for deliberation if one hundred members of the assembly unite to ask for it.
- XIII. The King desires that under these circumstances and to restore a conciliatory spirit, the three chambers commence by naming separately a commission composed of the number of deputies they may judge suitable to prepare the form and distribution of the bureaux of conference, which should treat the different affairs.
- XIV. The general assembly of the deputies of the three orders will be presided over by the presidents chosen by each of the orders, and according to their ordinary rank.
- XV. Good order, decency, and even liberty of the ballot, require that His Majesty prohibit, as he expressly does, that any person other than the members of the three orders comprising the Estates General, should be present at their deliberations, whether they deliberate in common or separately.

I have also wished, gentlemen, to have placed again under your eyes the different benefits that I grant to my people. It is not to circumscribe your zeal in the circle that I am going to trace; for I shall adopt with pleasure every other view of public good which will be proposed by the Estates General. I can say without deluding myself that never has a King done so much for any nation; but what other can better have merited by its sentiments than the French nation! I do not fear to say it; those who, by exaggerated pretensions or by unseasonable difficulties

would still retard the effect of my paternal intentions would render themselves unworthy of being regarded as French.

#### Declaration of Intentions

- I. No new impost shall be established, no old one shall be continued beyond the term fixed by the laws, without the consent of the representatives of the nation.
- II. The new impositions which will be established, or the old ones which will be continued, shall hold only for the interval which will elapse until the time of the following session of the Estates General.
- III. As the borrowing of money might lead to an increase of taxes, no money shall be borrowed without the consent of the Estates General; under the condition, however, that in case of war or other national danger, the sovereign shall have the right to borrow without delay, to the amount of one hundred millions. For it is the formal intention of the King never to make the safety of his empire dependent upon any person.
- IV. The Estates General shall examine with care the situation of the finances, and they shall demand all the information necessary to enlighten them perfectly.
- V. The statement of receipts and expenses shall be made public each year, in a form proposed by the Estates General and approved by His Majesty.
- VI. The sums attributed to each department shall be determined in a fixed and invariable manner, and the King submits to this general rule even the funds that are destined for the maintenance of his household.
- VII. The King wishes, to assure this fixity of the different expenses of the state, that provisions suitable to accomplish this object be suggested to him by the Estates General. And His Majesty will adopt them, if they are in accordance with the royal dignity and the indispensable celerity of the public service.
- VIII. The representatives of a nation faithful to the laws of honor and probity will make no attack upon the public faith, and the King expects from them that the confidence of the creditors of the state be assured and secured in the most authentic manner.
- IX. When the formal dispositions announced by the clergy and the nobility to renounce their pecuniary privileges will have become a reality by their deliberations, it is the intention of the King to sanction them, and there will no longer exist any kind of privileges or distinctions in the payment of the contributions.
- X. The King wishes that, to consecrate a disposition so important, the name of *taille* be abolished in the Kingdom and that this impost be joined either to the *vingtiemes* or to any other territorial impost, or finally that it be replaced in some way, but always in just and equal proportions and without distinction of estate, rank, and birth.
- XI. The King wishes that the tax of *franc-fief* be abolished from the time when the revenues and fixed expenses of the state will have been put in an exact balance.
- XII. All rights, without exception, will be constantly respected, and His Majesty expressly understands under the name of rights tithes, rents, feudal and seignorial rights, and, in general, all the rights and prerogatives useful or honorary attached to lands and fiefs or pertaining to persons.
- XIII. The first two orders of the state will continue to enjoy exemption from personal charges, but the King would be pleased to have the Estates General consider means of converting this kind of charges into pecuniary contributions and that then all the orders of the state may be subjected equally to them.
- XIV. It is the intention of His Majesty to determine, in accord with the Estates General, what the employments and duties will be which will preserve in the future the privilege of giving and transmitting nobility. His Majesty, nevertheless, according to the inherent right of his Crown, will grant titles of nobility to those of

his subjects who by services rendered to the King or to the state shall show themselves worthy of this recompense.

- XV. The King, desiring to assure the personal liberty of all citizens in the most solid and durable manner, invites the Estates General to seek for and to propose to him the means that may be the most fitting to conciliate the orders known under the name of *lettres de cachet* with the maintenance of public severity and with the precautions necessary in some cases to guard the honor of families, to repress with celerity the beginning of sedition, or to guarantee the state from the effects of criminal negotiations with foreign powers.
- XVI. The Estates General will examine and make known to His Majesty the means most fitting to reconcile the liberty of the press with the respect due to religion, custom, and the honor of the citizens.
- XVII. There will be established in the different provinces or generalities of the Kingdom provincial estates composed thus: two-tenths of the members of the clergy, a part of whom will necessarily be chosen in the episcopal order; three-tenths of members of the nobility, and five-tenths of members of the third estate.
- XVIII. The members of these Provincial-Estates will be freely elected by the respective Orders, and a certain amount of property will be necessary to be an elector or eligible.
- XIX. The deputies to these provincial estates will deliberate in common upon all affairs, following the usage observed in the provincial assemblies which these estates will replace.
- XX. An intermediary commission, chosen by these estates, will administer the affairs of the province during the interval from one session to another, and these intermediary commissions becoming alone responsible for their conduct will have for delegates persons chosen wholly by them or the provincial estates.
- XXI. The Estates General will propose to the King their views upon all the other parts of interior organization of the provincial estates and upon the choice of forms applicable to the election of the members of this assembly.
- XXII. Independently of the objects of administration with which the provincial assemblies are charged, the King will confide to the provincial estates the administration of the hospitals, prisons, charity stations, foundling-homes, the inspection of the expenses of the cities, the surveillance over the maintenance of the forests, the protection and sale of the wood, and over other objects which could be more usefully administered by the provinces.
- XXIII. The disputes occurring in the province where ancient estates exist, and the protests that have arisen against the constitution of the assemblies, ought to claim the attention of the Estates General. They will make known to His Majesty the dispositions of justice and wisdom that it is suitable to adopt to establish a fixed order in the administration of these same provinces.
- XXIV. The King invites the Estates General to occupy themselves in the quest of the proper means to turn to account the most advantageously the domains which are in his hands, and to propose to him equally their views upon what can be done the most conveniently with the domains that have been leased.
- XXV. The Estates General will consider the project conceived a long time ago by His Majesty of transferring the collection of tariffs to the frontiers of the Kingdom, that the most perfect liberty may reign in the internal circulation of national or foreign merchandise.
- XXVI. His Majesty desires that the unfortunate effects of the impost upon salt and the importance of this revenue be carefully discussed, and that in all the substitutions means of lightening the collection may at least be proposed.

- XXVII. His Majesty wishes also that the advantages and inconveniences of the internal revenue tax on liquors and other imposts, but without losing sight of the absolute necessity of assuring an exact balance between the revenues and expenses of the state.
- XXVIII. According to the wish that the King manifested by his declaration of 23 September last, His Majesty will examine with a serious attention the plans which may be presented to him relative to the administration of justice, and to the means of perfecting the civil and criminal laws.
- XXIX. The King wishes that the laws he will have promulgated during the session and after the advice or according to the wish of the Estates General may experience in their registration and execution no delay nor any obstacle in all the extent of his Kingdom.
- XXX. His Majesty wishes that the use of the *corvée* for the making and maintenance of the roads be entirely and forever abolished in his Kingdom.
- XXXI. The King desires that the abolition of the right of *main-morte*, of which His Majesty has given the example in his domains, be extended to all France and that means be proposed to him for providing the indemnity which would be due the lords in possession of this right.
- XXXII. His Majesty will make known at once to the Estates General the regulations with which he occupies himself for the purpose of restricting the *capitaineries*. To give, furthermore in this connection, which touches the most nearly his own pleasures, a new proof of his love for his people.
- XXXIII. The King invites the Estates General to consider the drawing for the army in all its relations and to study the means of reconciling what is due to the defense of the state with the extenuations that His Majesty desires to procure for his subjects.
- XXXIV. The King wishes that all the dispositions of public order and of kindness toward his people that His Majesty will have sanctioned by his authority during the present session of the Estates General—those among others relative to personal liberty, the equality of contributions, and the establishment of the provincial estates—may never be changed without the consent of the three orders, given separately. His Majesty places them in the same rank with the national properties that, like all other property, he wishes to place under the most assured protection.
- XXXV. His Majesty, after having called the Estates General to study, together with him, great matters of public utility and of everything which can contribute to the happiness of his people, declares in the most express manner that he wishes to preserve in its entirety and without the least impairment the constitution of the army, as well as every authority, both police authority and power over the militia, such as the French monarchs have constantly enjoyed.

You have, gentlemen, heard the substance of my dispositions and of my wishes; they are conformable to the earnest desire that I have for the public welfare. And if, by a fatality far from my thoughts, you should abandon me in so fine an enterprise, alone I will assure the well-being of my people; alone I will consider myself as their true representative. And knowing your *cahiers*, knowing the perfect accord which exists between the most general wish of the nation and my kindly intentions, I will have all the confidence which so rare a harmony ought to inspire, and I will advance towards the goal that I wish to attain with all the courage and firmness that it ought to inspire in me.

Reflect, gentlemen, that none of your projects, none of your dispositions can have the force of a law without my special approbation. So I am the natural guarantee of your respective rights, and all the orders of the state can rest upon my equitable impartiality. All distrust upon your part would be a great injustice. It is I, at present, who am doing everything for the happiness of my people, and it is rare, perhaps, that the only ambition of a sovereign is to come to an understanding with his subjects that they may accept his kindnesses.

I, order you, gentlemen, to separate immediately, and to go tomorrow morning each to the chamber allotted to your order in order to take up again your sessions. I order therefore the Grand Master of Ceremonies to have the halls prepared.

Fred Morrow Fling, ed. *Source Studies on the French Revolution* (Lincoln: Students' Co-Operative Book Club, 1899), I:44-58 [modernized]