

MEMOIRS

Jean-Sylvain Bailly (1736–1793), President of the National Assembly

Tuesday, 23 June 1789

We had been given notice that the first two orders would enter by the avenue entrance, the commons by an opposite door, facing the *Rue des Chantiers*, and that the latter would gather in a wooden gallery, which served as a vestibule to this door and where there was ordinarily a café. There was nothing to be done about this inconvenience; but it was felt. They (the commons) met there then. I arrived in good season.

We waited a very long time. Murmurs began to be heard. This gallery was too small to contain all the deputies, with whom in truth, were a number of curious people in short mantles, imitating the costume of the deputies. Many of the deputies were outside in the rain. The murmurs re-doubled. It was my place to knock at the door; the bodyguards of the post opened to me, and told me that we could enter very soon. Nevertheless, the indignation grew more marked. There was talk of withdrawing. I rapped again and asked for the Grand Master of Ceremonies; someone replied that it was not known where he was.

I was very anxious; I saw that it was possible and even natural that the injured commons would withdraw. And then what an imprudent thing for the ministry to force the King either to hold the meeting in their absence or to discontinue it in default of their presence! Very soon the intention to withdraw was manifested by loud shouts. The care of the dignity of the commons rested upon me. I rapped again; I asked for the commanding officer. The Captain of the Guards, le Duc de Guiche, appeared. I said to him, "Sir, you have admittance to the interior; I beg of you to find M. de Brézé and to warn him that the representatives of the nation cannot remain where they are; that they will not wait any longer, and if they are not admitted immediately, they are going to withdraw."

A moment after, the door was opened; de Brézé came to receive us and we entered. I took the lead, walking between the Grand Master and the Master of Ceremonies, and followed by all the members of the National Assembly, two by two, and in the most profound silence. On the way, I made de Brézé feel all the inconsiderateness and the danger of the measures which had been taken. He informed me that an accident, the sudden death of Paporet, one of the secretaries of the King, and to whom they had tried to give some aid, had retarded the entrance; which was quite natural. But, upon entering, we found the two other orders in place and I have always been persuaded that we had been made to wait thus in order to allow them time to take their places, for fear that the commons, constituted as a national assembly, would wish to take the first places. The coming of the King was not long delayed...

Immediately after this discourse, the King had a first declaration read; but first, the Guard of the Seals, having advanced to the throne, and spoken to the King upon bended knee, according to the ordinary custom, said: "The King orders you to put on your hats." I put on my hat; a number of deputies from the commons did the same; neither the nobility nor the clergy did so. Doubtless, in the frivolous love of distinctions, they no longer cared to keep their hats on in the presence of the King when we had our hats on. By putting on my hat, I had wished to preserve and indicate our rights. As soon as I saw the majority without hats, I took my hat off, and everybody remained uncovered...

That done, the King spoke again.

Then the King had a second declaration read, entitled, "Declaration of the Intentions of the King," and which contains the favors that he grants his people. It offers a plan of reform of abuses, a plan of administration, and the rights granted rather than due the nation.

It was astonishing that in speaking to the assembled nation, the King was made to say, "the King wishes, the King understands"; that he had been made to annul decrees made by the nation, when the supreme leader, the

hereditary representative of the nation, can only have a veto; that in the second declaration, which is a species of new constitution, no part in the legislative power is given to the Estates General; the necessity of the consent of the nation to taxation appears to be a concession rather than a recognition of the national right. Many deputies noticed the expressions, the favors that the King grants to his people; can the King, sole master and sole provisory legislator in the absence of the nation, speak thus to the nation assembled in Estates General? During this reading, the commons remained in the most profound silence, while the two declarations were accompanied and followed by much applause from the majority of the nobility and the minority of the clergy; this was right, since it was their work in part. The suspicion was justified because the articles VIII and IX reserve for a separate deliberation the things which particularly interested the two orders, the feudal and seignorial rights, the useful rights and honorific prerogatives of the first two orders, ecclesiastical discipline, the régime of the secular and regular bodies; that meant that all that was an affair of privileged classes, and not national affairs; it was to establish the first two orders as sovereign judges in their own cause. The reading ended, the King spoke again....

Unfortunate prince, where have you been advised and how much have you been deceived! After the departure of the King, the entire nobility and part of the clergy withdrew; the commons remained in their place, calm and in silence. The Grand Master of Ceremonies approached me, and I said to him, "Sir, the assembly adjourned to meet after the royal session; I cannot dissolve it until it has deliberated." "Is that your reply, and am I to communicate it to the King?" "Yes, sir." And I added to my colleagues who were around me, "I believe that an assembly of the nation can not receive an order." It was said and repeated that I had made this reply to de Brézé. The official reply to his message is that which I have just reported. I respected the King too much to make such a reply; I knew too well the regard that a president owes to the assembly to commit it thus without its consent. It was for the assembly and not for me to weigh, consider, and declare its rights.

In truth, Mirabeau spoke, and becoming angry with the Grand Master of Ceremonies, said about what has since been repeated, "Go tell those who sent you that the force of bayonets is nothing against the will of the nation." This response has been greatly praised, which is not a reply, but a retort that he should not have made, that he had no right to make, since the president alone should have spoken, and which, at the same time that it was out of place, was beyond all moderation. Moderation requires that one should reply only to that which is said. Had bayonets been spoken of, had force been announced, had a menace escaped from the mouth of de Brézé? No. He recalled, according to his duty, an order of the King. Had the King the right to give this order? The assembly by continuing the session decided that he had not; and in declaring that the assembly could not be separated before having deliberated, I had preserved for it its rights and I had continued in the moderation from which an assembly and its president should never deviate.

Workmen began to make the necessary changes in the hall. After having consulted the assembly, I had an order given them to stop. It was proposed to adjourn until the next day to discuss the declaration of the King. This advice was rejected as soon as proposed. Camus disclosed a firmer opinion in proposing to declare that the assembly persisted in its preceding decrees, while postponing the session to the next day. Abbé Siéyès said, "You are today what you were yesterday." Barnave observed "that the decrees of the assembly depended only upon the assembly. The first has declared what you are, the second decides upon the imposts that you alone can consent to, the third is an oath that prescribes your duty. This is not a case of sanction. The King cannot destroy what he can not sanction." The discussion was not long. The assembly, in admirable order and a majestic silence, in the presence of forty or fifty witnesses, who were upon the platform, adopting the motion of Camus, declared unanimously that it persisted in its preceding decrees....

Mirabeau made a motion to declare the inviolability of the deputies, and there was a great discussion. I myself opposed it, with the idea that inviolability was sufficiently established by the fact, and that every precaution which would announce uneasiness and display doubt was apt only to weaken it. Mirabeau replied to me with heat, "You do not know to what you expose yourself! If you do not carry the decree, sixty deputies, and you

first of all, will be arrested this night.” We were told afterwards, but I have not had occasion to verify the fact, that while we deliberated, the bodyguard received an order to march and to form in the avenue before the hall, and that afterward they had had a counter-order. However it may be, the motion of Mirabeau was adopted, and the following decree was passed....

I finally came over to this opinion because I felt that if inviolability did not need to be declared, it was nevertheless good to make a law that could become a weapon in the hands of each one of the dispersed deputies, a law which should give notice that the nation existed to avenge its representatives, and which would frighten those who would think of rendering themselves instigators of arbitrary and violent measures. These two decrees were passed in the presence of many members of the clergy. Those whose credentials were verified gave their votes at the time they gave their opinions and the others asked that mention might be made of their presence. And the assembly having adjourned to the next day, I closed the session.

Fred Morrow Fling. *Source Studies on the French Revolution* (1907):17–22.