

THE ESTATES GENERAL

Barere de Vieusac (1755–1841), Representative from Bigorre

23 June 1789

First of all the two privileged orders were seated; the national assembly testified its discontent by reiterated murmurs. The two secretaries went to Monsieur de Brézé to complain of the indecency of so long a delay, saying that the assembly was going to withdraw. The murmurs began afresh; the president rapped on the door; de Guiche appeared; a vigorous complaint was made because of so long a delay; de Brézé was called for.

It was proposed that the assembly withdraw. De Brézé arrived. The president said that he should complain to the King of the shortcomings of the Masters of Ceremony. “Of us, sir?” said de Brézé. “Yes, sir. It is high time that we were seated.” The Masters of Ceremonies preceded the president and the members of the national assembly entered two by two in the most profound silence at half past ten.

The throne was placed at the back of the hall in the direction of the entrance of the menus; at the right were the clergy, at the left the nobility, and on the two sides, extending from the middle to the end of the hall, were the members of the national assembly. The four heralds and the King at arms were placed in the center. The throne of the King was raised upon a platform that occupied the back of the hall as far as the second column. At the base of the platform, around a table, several ministers were grouped; Necker was not among them....

24 June 1789

After the departure of the King, several *curés* and all the members of the National Assembly remained motionless in the seats that they occupied. A quarter of an hour later, the Marquis de Brézé, the Grand Master of Ceremonies, approached the president and asked him if he had not heard the orders of the King. The president replied to him, “Sir, be good enough to address the assembly that has decided that it must deliberate.” De Brézé did not re-appear. A mournful silence reigned in the assembly.

Camus took the floor, saying: “The authority of the deputies forming this assembly is recognized; it is also recognized that a free nation may not be taxed without its consent; you have, then, done what you should have done. If, at our first advance, we are arrested, what will happen in the future? We must persist. Nothing is more dangerous than reserves and protestations; this form destroys all rights. Of what are we witnesses? At the opening of the estates, absolute orders.”...

Barnave said, “Your action depends on your situation, your decrees depend upon you alone. You have declared what you are; you have no need of sanction. The voting of the taxes depends upon you alone. Envoys of the nation, organs of its will to make a constitution, you are the National Assembly and may remain assembled as long as you may judge necessary in the interests of your constituents. Such was your situation yesterday. What has been done today? Is it, then, in keeping with your prudence to abandon the cause of the public thus? Nothing remains, for the executive power to do, but to separate you, but it is due to your dignity to maintain your position, to persist in the use of the title national assembly. Leave no doubts in the minds of your fellow citizens. You do not know, gentlemen, where force would conduct you and perhaps the public indignation that would crush you.”...

Monsieur de Glaizen, deputy from Rennes, having spoken of the indiscreet applause of some members of the two first orders, added, “Absolute power speaks through the mouth of the best of kings, through the mouth of a sovereign, who recognized that the people ought to make the laws. It is a bed of justice held in a national assembly. It is a sovereign who speaks as a master, when he ought to ask advice. Let the aristocrats triumph; they have only a day. The Prince will soon be enlightened. No, the Prince will not persist in his course. It is liberty that we ought to maintain—the greatness of your courage will equal the greatness of the circumstances, it is necessary to die for the country—you have deliberated wisely, gentlemen. An arbitrary act that is about to ruin the kingdom, that is about to produce anarchy, ought not to terrify you.”

Monsieur de Mirabeau, in supporting the motion of Camus, said that he blessed liberty because it ripened such fine fruit in the national assembly; that he was of the opinion that a decree declaring the inviolability of the deputies ought to be passed. "Such a course," he said, "would not be a manifestation of fear, but an act of prudence, a check upon the violent counsels that surround the Throne."

Pétion de Villeneuve took the floor to support the two motions: "An arbitrary act has severed the knot already fastened by the clergy. No consideration without liberty. Our safety lies in firmness."

Monsieur Buzot said that he would say little, that indignation is not verbose. "The National Assembly," he added, "may not commit perjury. What an assault upon the liberty of the Estates General!"

Monsieur l'Abbé Sieyès contented himself with saying, "Gentlemen, you are today what you were yesterday."

Grant the elder spoke at length on the articles contained in the King's declaration, endeavoring to show that they were only an adroit trick to turn the people against their deputies. He spoke with as much sense as force.

Monsieur l'Abbé Gregoire spoke with energy, and pretended that to continue to work on the constitution would be to fall in with the views of the King, who was still deceived by those around him.

At half-past-two, a standing vote was taken on the motion of Camus. The National Assembly declared unanimously that it persisted in maintaining its previous decrees. The members of the clergy asked "that it be noted that the deliberation had taken place in their presence."

The vote was taken in the presence of several officers of the French guards and of some gentlemen, deputies of the nobility, who had remained quiet spectators of the scene.

Passed by a majority of four hundred and eighty-six votes against thirty-four.

Fred Morrow Fling. *Source Studies on the French Revolution* (1907):44-47.