

LETTRE
AU PEUPLE,
OU
PROJET
D'UNE
CAISSE PATRIOTIQUE,
Par une CITOYENNE.

Letter to the People, or Patriotic Purse Project.¹

*By a citizeness of Vienne, and can be found in Paris,
at the sellers of novelties
1788*²

Letter to the People

It is to you, the French, that I write; it is to you that I submit my observations. Your nationality is enough to encourage me and, you will serve it by endorsing me.³ If the natural judgement that enlightens you is allowed to guide your decisions, then you will never behave imprudently.

Man is without doubt the hardest creature to define. Superior to all other animals thanks to his intelligence, his reasoning and his capacity to extend his learning, he is nevertheless more irrational, and less humane than the beasts. It seems that nature, depriving animals of our advantages, has given them in exchange a peaceful life sheltered from all anxiety. These are the thoughts that came to me last night as a result of the unease I felt when the disturbing sounds I could hear all around eventually reached my own door, throwing me into a panic to make a lunatic laugh, but the truly wise tremble. Sadly for humanity, the latter are in short supply, and more unfortunately, the opinions of those who hold extremely seditious views sway the People more than the sage advice of prudent individuals or good Citizens. I will not focus on public rumours; I do not listen to personal discussions to know if this or that powerful party is inciting these destructive delights that are the enemy of peace and quiet; but if a prompt remedy is not found, perhaps the harm will prove to be irreparable. It has been observed that the greatest

1 This was the first political pamphlet written by de Gouges and was advertised in the *Journal Général de France* of 6 November 1788 as a remedy for the country's deficit. Ten months after its publication, on 7 September 1789, eleven women from the artistic milieu made an offering of their jewellery to the National Assembly. This symbolic gesture of female virtue (they all dressed in white) became iconic thanks to a wide and speedy distribution of prints depicting the event, it also generated a movement of patriotic donations to the state which lasted several years and helped fund the army at war. De Gouges is not remembered as having first suggested a Patriotic Purse.

2 It is worth noting that de Gouges never lived in Vienne but her presumed paternal uncle Jean Georges Lefranc de Pompignan (1715 – 1790) was Archbishop there from 1774 – 1789. She alludes to one of his writings *L'Etat libéré* later in the text though makes no mention of her connection to the author despite having written about him in her semi-autobiographical novel *Mémoire de Madame Valmont* of 1784.

This translation is based on the copy in the British Library, London. The one held at the *Bibliothèque nationale* in Paris is slightly different and includes this extra information for buyers '...and can be found in Paris at MARADAN, bookseller, rue des Noyers, No. 33....' plus a full page engraving by Frusotte illustrating the unifying effect a patriotic tax would have on the citizenry accompanied by a quote from the text: '...all Citizens would see themselves in the same mirror and this touching portrait would define both the soul, the heart and the spirit of the French.'

3 The original French uses the word 'meriter' which more often means 'deserve' but in the 18th century could also mean 'serve'; I felt that the latter was appropriate however, an alternative translation could be '...as long as you deserve it, you will endorse me'.

troubles that befall States often stem from the tumultuous unbridled diversions of the People. If the King is unhappy, his Subjects cannot be content; but all can be resolved under such a good Monarch. The damage predates his enthronement. Either my instinctive understanding is misguided or I am a perceptive observer who believes, based on all I have seen and heard, that the *deficit* that is discrediting France took hold during the most luxurious and flourishing reign; it grew under Louis XV; Louis XVI was unable to hold back the catastrophe that manifested itself in the most frightful violence. His predecessors caused the problem, some in ignorance, others voluntarily; must he, a more unfortunate king than his ancestors, be held responsible for their mistakes? What is this injustice that now dominates the greatest number of minds who, without considering how to achieve the greater good, deliver the people up to unbridled impulsive behaviour through seditious discourse and writings that only increase trouble and do nothing to offer a remedy for our ills. Would it not be preferable to work towards a prompt and salutary solution, rather than seeking to prolong the general misery? A deep despair exists in Paris: the Worker lacks any bread to offer his wife or his children, and yet he finds money to lavish on his amusements, or rather his follies, and his extravagant pleasures. Is one to believe that the People lack humanity, undoubtedly not; they are more responsive to nature than those who nonchalantly pass their lives in sumptuous houses full of gilded panelling but, you will say, the People have no other pleasure than to drown their hardship and worries in the pleasures that seem so natural to them. Indeed they are natural given that they come from the heart; but what appalling outcomes result from these moments? And you, famous Authors, who only knew how to speak to Kings, aspire to something greater, purer and more praiseworthy: I address the People; I beg them to read me attentively and to judge whether or not I think as an honest Citizeness. No doubt his Majesty will not find it a problem that a woman, moved by such widespread suffering, dares to prevent, thanks to her presentiment, even crueller hardship.

The Rulings of the King and the reinstated Parliament, the specific prohibitions banning the Public from convening, from rallying and from letting off either rockets or bangers, ought, in the eyes of the Public, to be sacred orders imposed merely for its own well-being, and yet the Public at such a favourable moment, will not conform. It disobeys both Parliament, whose recall it demanded with such determination, and the King who has just acceded to its demands. What clearer proof do you need of his clemency and moderation? I submit my observations to the Public of which I am a member; but a member of the weakest part: if my opinions lack energy, my sex will be my justification; if my style is diffuse and incoherent, my agitation is my excuse; if this work is ineffective, my objective is laudable; and you, the Public, to whom it is dedicated, will you blame me for the incentive that encourages me and that has rekindled my strength.

Thwarted, by and large, by the unkindness of men, seeking only to end my days in deep solitude, ready to renounce literature, that delight of rich and fecund imaginations, all that comes from my feeble genius must be considered as a fruit that nature has developed, one that has never been embellished by the hands of men. This fruit is not for sale. A little known individual, generally impervious to honours and fortune, my only ambition for a career as a playwright being as limited as my talent would allow, I heard and I saw everything with the painful sensibility of a true Citizeness. Nothing, in this time of inaction and disorder, could have incited me to impetuosity. Shame to all those whose appalling talent is to sow discord and poison through their ambiguous writings. Oh how I pity those who, against their better nature, sell their eulogies to the highest bidder! Sublime truth! You have always guided me, been the foundation of my opinions, take away my ability to write if ever I betray the conscience that your light has illuminated; but forgive me if, occasionally, in my eagerness to endorse those who appeared to be legitimate, I praised those who did not deserve it. One day *my confessions* will show the Public my true

character, my way of life and my sensibility.⁴ If envy has sown my path with unusually ferocious calumniators, then, one day, posterity will find me all the more interesting; if the originality of my writings is not deemed sufficient, maybe my misfortune will recommend me to all and it will be recognised that a woman who was rooted in all her work, deserved not only the good will of the great but also the esteem of all men.

What, then, has driven me to write this letter to the Public and to proclaim in it, perhaps with a little too much preamble, the belated thoughts that my fears inspired. Last night, at about three o'clock, a large group of citizens came down the rue de Vaugirard, their shouts horrified the entire neighbourhood, they fired several bangers and rockets, then they violently knocked on the door of a Grocer; they forced this trembling man to come to his window. They demanded torches from him. Just the word 'torches', at that moment in time, must have frightened all those who heard it spoken. The Grocer refused, as best he could, to acquiesce to their demands; but the situation became so violent that he found himself obliged to hand over the torches that were demanded of him. At first I blamed the Grocer for caving in to pressure from the People for it could have resulted in unpleasant accidents, but seeing that nothing unfortunate came of his actions, I praised the prudence of this man. Perhaps if he had, in effect, behaved at this moment as I saw fit then the result would have been a lethal state of affairs.

Oh People, unhappy Citizens! Listen to the voice of a fair-minded and sensitive woman. You can only be happy if you do not face financial ruin. Your labour is arduous your ambitions modest. You work solely to feed your wives and children whose languishing arms reach out to you; and during this public disorder, maybe you are abandoning them to die of want or pain. The twenty-four hours that you lose create a *deficit* in your finances that are as dangerous as those of the State: the State has resources, you only have your strength. If you wear it out with late night foolishness, how will you find the vigour and the courage to usefully return to work? What am I saying? Is that all you have to fear? What of the bloody battles that always follow these unbridled jubilations? Authority has to be maintained and the result is a frightful butchery. Without knowing whom you are fighting for, you throw yourselves heart and soul into a treacherous path cleared for you by a seditious, ill-intentioned *felon*. This can start a civil war: a civil war! Heavens! I tremble as I speak of it! Are there any greater fears for humanity than this calamity? But what am I saying? Nothing can bring about such a cruel event. France is already in enough deep distress that none could seek to increase her troubles. If the parliament is keen on the common good, as it has wished to suggest through its actions, then it will be influenced by the lights of the Estates General; but the one thing that no wise Citizen can ignore, or doubt, is the goodness and clemency of His Majesty.

The public is crying out for a change of Ministers; the King, kind and well-meaning towards his People, is bowing to those desires. He recognises that no one is better qualified to restore order to the financial mess than Mr. Necker; he does not shy away from putting him in charge of the Treasury; and although it is an acknowledgement of the probity, virtues and talents of Mr. Necker; it has been a while since one has witnessed a King recall a minister disgraced during his reign.

Such paternal goodness should enflame the hearts of all good Frenchmen! Before the recall of this great man, before the re-establishment of the Parliament, I yielded to the common agitation. How easy it is to imagine and to believe in the worst! But as I consider that an all powerful King can use his great authority to thunder against the slightest disobedience, I feel myself overwhelmed by a zeal that inclines to admiration, and that leads to enthusiasm for such great clemency and moderation. This same admiration shows me the true character of the French; I recognise that if it no longer held sway in the Nation, the State would be lost; but when I think that this sacred word is indestructible,

4 This is almost certainly an allusion to Rousseau's *Confessions* the first part of which was published in 1782 (only six years before this pamphlet and four years after the philosopher's death).

along with the love that each Subject holds for his Master, the patriotic blood that circulates in my veins tells me how to bring about the solution that I wish upon the Nation.

Here I present the solution: I have only my own faculties to put toward this proposal, but if it were practicable, it would be welcomed despite the few weaknesses apparent in my presentation. What then is this system that in my opinion would be suitable to pay off the national debt? It would be, I believe, voluntary taxation, something the Nation would celebrate. This memorable heartfelt gesture on the part of the French, recorded for posterity, would shape the most singular and remarkable epoch in the annals of the Monarchy.

My objectives being recognised I have the right, as a French woman and a good Citizeness, to communicate my ideas to my compatriots. Whilst discussing this subject with Citizens who are as keen to help the Nation as I am and who embraced my system, I learnt, through one of these individuals, that my good intentions had been anticipated in a work entitled *L'Etat libéré*.⁵ I soon got hold of it and found in this well-meaning work a mass of salutary ideas. Not as enlightened as the author, and not wanting to take advantage of the fact that he conceived of his project before me, I can only give myself credit for agreeing with him.

Ah! No doubt at this time of distress all true French people share a common aim. I will therefore put forward my ideas as clearly as I am able by simplifying the method of their execution. Some muddle-headed individuals argue that this expedient would bring shame upon the State; I argue that the opposite is true and that it would glorify the State. Does a son blush when he receives favours from his father? The King is like a father whose affairs are in a mess; it is therefore an honour, a proof of love and a sign of respect for his children to willingly fly to his side to help this unfortunate parent. The harm is done, a remedy is essential; but not like the one offered by a cynical Author whose culpable opinions have just been punished as befits such pernicious Ideas.

The King, in order to ease the financial crisis and to honour his commitments, asks for extra taxes. Parliament, sensing that the populace is facing ruin, refuses: these alternatives of demand and refusal aggravate the situation and do nothing to restore confidence, a voluntary tax...a voluntary tax in the name of the Nation would allow it to distinguish itself. The generous relief that was offered to those affected by the frost that devastated the fields at harvest time is proof positive that my system would work. I will start with the market porters and indiscriminately rise up to the highest levels of society; all who call themselves French will co-operate to save the State. The purse fit to receive these voluntary sums, offered to the King by his subjects, will be considered sacred; these assets will be limited by statute to paying off the national debt, no sum whatsoever can be taken from them under any pretext, or for any form of speculation. In order to ensure the correct administration of this system I would like every provincial administrator to be in charge of local public expenditure in their area, likewise the administrator of the Parisian municipality should be in charge of the Capital's expenditure. All Citizens contributing a sum to this purse, according to their means, would inscribe their names on a register, below the sum they had remitted to the said purse. This precaution would protect us from corruption and give each contributor a chance to acknowledge the other; all Citizens would see themselves in the same mirror and this touching portrait would define both the soul, the heart and the spirit of the French.

The market trader and the housekeeper would be pleased beyond measure to see their names alongside that of a Prince of the blood: come on, my friends, they would all say, by drinking less *grog*, by going less often to the *tavern* we can take a few pennies to our good King every month, and, because there will be no *official papers* or Soldiers with

⁵ Published in the spring of 1788 the opusculé *L'Etat libéré* was, according to the Montauban archivist Edouard Forestié, written by de Gouges's uncle the Archbishop of Vienne Jean-Georges Lefranc de Pompignan.

bayonets fixed on their guns, he will understand that our patriotic gesture is genuine; it will not be possible for the other Nations to accuse us of abandoning our King; and when the debt is fully repaid, he will, in his turn, give us all that we need to render our lives quiet and peaceful. Ah! If, as I hope, the People read my words, they will recognise that if they have money to buy powder and rockets (always a dangerous entertainment) then they can find some for the one who brings happiness to their lives, and to those of their children, by cutting back for a few more months. The Cobbler, the Tailor, the Wig-maker, the general Shop-keeper, seeing that all is blocked by inaction, that commerce is virtually destroyed, will make savings in the considered belief that when the State is less indebted all will flourish again: elderly bachelors who benefit from considerable fortunes, will offer their wealth to the State, in order to see their names on the list of true Frenchmen. As for Priests and Monks and others of the type, I must make some alternative suggestions: set apart from the luxuries of this world, not obliged to entertain, Ministers of peace and the corner-stones of the Church, without doubt they will hasten to add their names to the head of the register that will list the Benefactors of the Nation. Habituated, as they are, to self-imposed privations, a few more in order to pay off the national debt, as the good Citizens they are, will be as nothing to them. Those who find themselves endowed with great Abbeys and vast Priors will, without doubt, render to the King what is his due, as much from religious observation as from gratitude.

Dare I say on behalf of the Performers, as well as the audience that the Theatres will undoubtedly contribute to fill the purse that I propose for, despite the poverty of the State and the People, they are still attended with the same zeal; and as the author of *l'Etat libéré* states, a day of performances will be known as *The Political Entertainment*, and will be a gala day of festivities for the French. As for Princes, Lords and the Wealthy, they will all compete to pay this voluntary tax; a suitable name is needed to better embody this tax; I would like it to be called *The Patriotic Tax*: no one, down to the Boarder in a Convent, would refuse to make savings and participate in this tax. Ah! So many young people would register themselves on this list that should be published every month until the national debt is liquidated. Two young people united in matrimony could not find their union fulfilled if they had not sent a contribution to the Purse; whoever acquires a position or obtains a favour will likewise donate. An heir would give a share of his inheritance and a gambler his winnings to the Patriotic Purse. Yes, I dare opine in this way and, based on my own feelings, judge all my fellow citizens.

Penetrated as I am by my love for my Country I can present my opinions, fired up with this emotion, right up to the steps of the Throne and remind the King of the august promise he made to his People, when he encircled his brow with the diadem, to ceaselessly watch over the happiness of his Subjects; his wishes were thwarted, for fate, that master of the World, its People and its Kings, decided otherwise; but this contrary fate cannot stop mistakes and injustices being rectified once one understands the universal harm they do. The King, naturally good and well-meaning, a truth that can be uttered without being accused of exaltation or suspected of adulation, His Majesty who this far has been frustrated in his desire to support his People's well-being, seeing this new effort on the part of his Subjects to contribute to the welfare of the State, and according to his innate goodness, will resolve to make the greatest sacrifices. All sums used in fruitless expenditure should be refused and, instead, sent annually to the Patriotic purse. I am not well enough versed in these affairs to suggest how these expenditures might be reformed, but one that shocks me, and is ceaselessly in front of my eyes, proves to me that there are many others equally useless. The School of Song and Declamation is a good example; it costs the King about 100,000 *livres* per year, these 100,000 *livres* would not be out of place in the Patriotic purse, and would do more good than the Students who leave this School and contribute nothing that benefits the State.

I love the *Comédie*⁶ for it educates the world but whoever has lessons will learn nothing if they lack sensibility and feeling; the spirit, they say, cannot be acquired, but it can, nonetheless, be embellished; however sensibility is never improved if it is not already a natural attribute. Art is quite capable of creating automatons whose every gesture and accents it will direct but it can never produce Actors endowed with the necessary gifts that will allow them to rise to heights of sublime declamation. To prove my theory I only have to name those celebrated Actors forever immortalized and those living today for assuredly none of these famous Actors went to school and I doubt that any Student could ever be as talented as these Masters. *Le Kain, Mlles Clairon, Gauffin, Dumesnil, MM. Prévaille, Molé, Madame Prévaille, Madame Belcourt, Madame Vestris, Mademoiselles Sainval, Raucourt, Contat, M. Fleury*, all these actors and actresses celebrated for their talent, did they take classes in the School? At the Opera and the Italian theatre Mademoiselles Arnault, Le Vasseur, MM. Le Gros, Larrivée, Madame Favart, Madame La Ruelle, M. Carlin, M. Cailleau. M. Clairval et Madame Dugazon, these Actors and Actresses, as special as any I have named, did they attend the School? And the famous Garrick!...It is therefore a pointless expense for the Public as well as the State. Following this it would be possible to suggest other, more widespread, cuts than those I advise. My opinion is that there should be no reform within the Royal Household; the Sovereign must not only inspire respect and veneration in his Subjects by the splendour that surrounds him but, equally, he must be seen by foreigners to have a brilliance that is proper to his rank and gives the best impression of the Nation's riches. The French Court has always been the first Court in Europe; if its lustre becomes too tarnished it will no longer be the French Court. Any true French person will recognise the truth of this, which is essentially that politically the Monarchy must be sustained at the level to which it has risen. Any Finances withdrawn due to reforms within the Royal Household would be less fruitful than reforms of individual corruption that could be undertaken without scruple, as these would harm nobody.

Nowadays my sex is in a frenzy of luxury, the opening of the Patriotic Purse will put an end to all that: instead of buying ten hats of varying styles, women of integrity, pretty ones nonetheless for beauty does not exclude good sense or loyalty to one's country, these women, I say, will be content with one or two hats of good taste, and what is left over can be sent to the Purse.

The Queen, who lives up to her true nature by encouraging the return of M. Necker and who, herself, presented him to His Majesty as the only hope for France in this time of calamities, this Queen, I say, has shown by the joy that she manifested on this occasion that the French have always been dear to her heart. Who can doubt that she will make the greatest savings in her Finances to augment the funds of the Patriotic Purse? And the Nation, enchanted to see M. Necker in charge of the Finances, will help in every way to restore affairs to good order, showing the greatest proof of its esteem and confidence in his understanding and his virtue.

The Estates General may well find other solutions but whatever usage they may make of their own wisdom they cannot find the advice of a woman out of place; one who, despite the natural light-heartedness of her sex, has nonetheless some sensible opinions. This sex that is so often accused of frivolity usually holds, nevertheless, very ingenious ideas that are not totally disdained by the wise who sometimes even benefit from them and have the grace to admit it. Actually, from pretentious dandies and the glib right up to pedants, women are, in their eyes, useless members of society: but the clamour of men even more useless than flighty women is of no consequence to me for my aim is praiseworthy, my project is good and nothing can sway me from the path I have chosen. It is to the People that I present my project; it is to the Parliament that I look for affirmation that it is acceptable, and to the Estates General that it is laudable. If I am wrong, I

⁶ This probably refers to the national theatre rather than to the comedy genre. De Gouges was a keen theatregoer and hoped to make a career as a playwright.

apologise to the Public, as is only honourable and correct within the rules. Heaven has already forgiven me for that is where I find inspiration, at least so I believe. After all, I cannot refrain from admitting that when one has a true heart, a pure soul and an honest nature it is not possible to have anything other than good intentions. Finally, if some men hold good opinions and some hold bad ones, then the causes that animate them must be divergent. Thus, I believe that the cause that animates me is a good one and flows directly from a well-meaning heart. If I write poorly, I think clearly; no doubt my style will be considered poor, more naive than eloquent, but if I ever master the art of writing like Voltaire I will discard it in favour of speaking the truth, straight to the heart. When the sentiment is pure there is no need of elegant phrases or emphatic tones.

Oh French! True French, know my soul in its entirety. It is not ambition that moves me to write this epistle; only the good of my Motherland, and the love and respect I have for my King could excite my zeal. What am I saying? Maybe I would have stifled its development if the concerns I felt on the 26th of this month had not encouraged me to broadcast my ideas.⁷ Whether they are well considered or rejected the objective will always be dear to my Nation, at least that is my hope; if I was lucky enough to see my ideas taken up no doubt my sense of achievement would be without measure. In order to avoid accusations and suspicions of being overly ambitious I will hide my name, it would become too well-known, assuming that my epistle were to be effective. I myself would fear becoming prideful and thus poisoning the simplicity that nature bestowed upon me. It is with these sentiments of fraternity that I am, for all my compatriots, the most zealous woman and sincere citizeness.

⁷ I assume that de Gouges is referring to 26 August 1788 when riots broke out in Paris and an effigy of Loménie de Brienne, was burnt; since May 1787 he had been the kingdom's Controller of Finance and had resigned in favour of Necker on 25 August, leaving behind empty state coffers. However the autumn of 1788 saw other burnings and violent marches so perhaps she is referring to something that took place in October 1788 of which I am ignorant. Generally de Gouges wrote speedily in reaction to events but maybe, this being her first foray into political pamphlets, she preferred to prepare her text over several months.