

AVIS PRESSANT,
A LA CONVENTION,
PAR UNE VRAIS RÉPUBLICAINE.

Urgent Notice to the Convention, from a True Republican Woman.¹

MANDATARIES OF A SOVEREIGN PEOPLE,

When men's opinions and interests are divided at a time of revolution that is an end to liberty and equality: the union of true republicans is their strength and cements their government. It is the death sentence of tyrants. When will you be struck by this truth?

Citizens, the motherland is on the edge of an abyss; the lightning strike from the crowned brigands is about to set fire to all parts. I come to offer you the only means to save it. This means is easy since it is in your hands.

The National Convention has finally become a Pandora's box; will it be crime or virtue that triumphs? If it is crime then cover the statue of France with black crepe, give the sign of death, and end our troubles; if truth then make the republican laws speak, punish the agitators and end our troubles. Choose, and end our troubles.

The moment to supplant you through outrageous ambition, to crave popular applause, is passed. It is not a question of competing talents but rather the glory of saving one's motherland and this discussion is not a battle to the death between citizens, unlike the one you present in your sessions every day. You only have one precious moment left; know how to make the best of it or that will be the end of you, the people, the whole of France. Vainly I will name you Legislators, be worthy of it. Do even more, in order to imprint it in all minds, mutually forgive your wrongs, your hatreds, your dissensions that make you suspicious of conspiracies. Look into your consciences and read there the incalculable wrongs your furious vengeance can produce. See the external war made fruitless by the internal regional war.² See this generous multitude of the most brilliant Young Citizens fly to our frontiers to shed there a pure and blameless blood. And for whom, good God! For the Motherland alone, and not to satisfy your passions or return a tyrant to the throne.

Mandataries of the French Republic, a greater plan carries me towards you. Yes, everything tells me that I will succeed in my enterprise. The welfare of the people, the prosperity of the Motherland, all must impose upon you the obligation to reunite. The

¹ This text, placarded around Paris, was sent as a letter to the Convention on 20 March 1793 in an attempt to persuade the deputies to end their disputes and unite to govern the country threatened by their recent declarations of war against Great Britain, Holland and Spain.

Convention was the name given to the third iteration of France's ruling body since July 1789, the first was the National Assembly, the second from 1 October 1791 was named the Legislative Assembly and the third from 21 September 1792 was named Convention in honour of the 1787 American gathering of that name that led to the signing of the United States Constitution.

² The internal war referenced here is the insurrection in the Vendée in western France which had erupted in early March 1793 partly fuelled by anger at the new conscription laws passed a few weeks earlier but also a reflection of popular anger at the perceived rise of a new pro-republican middle class that was seemingly unwilling to improve the lives of the local peasant classes. Traditionally a staunchly Catholic area largely overseen by local nobility the fight soon took on a serious counter-revolutionary aspect and grew ever more successful until eventually, in the winter of 1793 and spring of 1794 it was violently crushed by republican forces in what has come to be described controversially as a form of local genocide. Like many major events of this period historians have been divided on the causes and subsequent propaganda surrounding this civil insurrection. Certainly as de Gouges implies it required troops supposedly raised to fight on France's external borders to be deployed internally.

aristocrats congratulate themselves on your divisions. I heard with my own ears in a theatre corridor: 'Our affairs are going well, the rascals of the National Convention no longer agree; our triumph is certain.' Oh Convention! Abandon that title right now and become the true senate of the French. Become the equal of the world's first Areopagus.³ End your debates, your scandalous dissension, and confound the wicked. Elevate yourself to the height of your functions; take on all the virtues of the republican character and the manners of a proud and generous people. Stifle all particular resentment and give way to public felicity. May this solemn reunion make European tyrants blanch and the internal agitators tremble. May this reconciliation, more durable than the one that was but in place during the Legislative Assembly, exterminate the royalists and lift up our republican heads to face the despots who fight against us.

Oh my fellow Citizens! If only I could pour my entire soul into yours. You would no longer be assailed by all kinds of fears, by all kinds of passions. You would feel only the need to forgive and a love of public good. You would occupy yourselves only in putting the finishing touches to the structure of the constitution and the people, blessing your work, would come to your sessions with cries of joy from all sides to show their gratitude, and to offer you the sweetest recompense for your fraternal labours. Could you possibly prefer their maledictions? No, that is impossible. No, egotism cannot overpower you. No, sordid self-interest always damages those who allow themselves to be carried away by it and cannot debase your hearts primed to lead others towards this saintly reunion. Oh brotherly sentiments! Oh nature! Oh justice! Precious gifts from heaven, descend amongst our Legislators; come and banish hatred, passion, then I will recognise the hand of Providence that for so long has watched over France.

Which side will be the first to abjure its resentment? Is it you, *Montagne*, that will be the first to descend from your despotic throne? Is it you *Plaine* who, having no need to descend, will take the first step? Or, transported by a spontaneous impulse, will both parties join together in the middle of the French Senate?⁴

Montagne, Plaine, Brissotins, Girondistes, Robespierrots, Maratistes, disappear, infamous epithets!⁵ Disappear forever, and may the names of Legislators, of Brothers, take your place for the benefit of the People, for social calm and for the triumph of the Motherland!

Legislators, what an example of fraternity the Parisian sections, the Commune and all the constituted powers gave you yesterday! They were not content to just ensure the safety of your lives, they wanted furthermore, through a solemn pact, to imprint in all hearts that these lives are absolutely inseparable from the welfare of the Motherland which only a sincere reunion on your part can make possible. Could you hesitate when the prosperity of the Republic makes it your sacred duty?

And you, People of Paris that the entire Universe seeks to slander, you can show through sustained constancy that if the Revolution is your work it will be eternally sustained by a respect for the rule of Law; that despite the malicious naysayers who unite to come between you and the *Départements*, a breach that would cause your blood to flow, you will constantly be vigilant and protect its representatives.⁶

3 The Areopagus was a powerful non-elected council of ancient Athens. De Gouges often uses the expression to imply wisdom and integrity of the highest order.

4 'Où' meaning where is the first word of the sentence in the original text but does not make sense given the sentence is a question. 'Ou' its accent free homonym means 'or' and I think was meant here.

5 These are all parties or factions within government. *Montagne* i.e. mountain and *Plaine* i.e. plain were so named because the former sat in the topmost tiers of seating and the latter in the lower ones. *Robespierrot* probably coined by journalists in 1792 would have been understood pejoratively because a *pierrrot*, derived from a famous pantomime character, was used as shorthand for an idiot, or a nobody.

6 Eighty-three *départements* were created in 1790 to unify the former administrative regions of the kingdom.

OLYMPE DE GOUGES.

Nota bene. I join to this text the one I published when I offered to defend the last French king.⁷ This led to my being exceptionally persecuted, which may one day be my claim to fame. May those who pursued me, and continue to pursue me due to these writings, and claim to be patriots and republicans, despite these virtues being foreign to them, at last learn to recognise them in these works that they call royalist.

CITIZEN PRESIDENT,

The Universe has its eyes fixed on the trial of the first and last king of France. I race to bring to the convention the actual letters written to me by the gentlemen Brissac and Laporte.⁸ With them I enclose five hundred examples of my *Moral Reckoning*.⁹

Citizen president, today I am interested in a greater matter; that of the glory of my country. I offer myself, following the courageous Malesherbes, as Louis' advocate.¹⁰ Let us leave my sex to one side; heroism and generosity belong equally to women; the revolution offers more than one example. I am a candid and loyal republican, without stain or fault; no one doubts it, even those who affect to disregard my civic virtues: I can therefore take charge of this cause.

As king I believe Louis to be in the wrong, but take away this proscribed title and he ceases to be guilty in the eyes of the republic. His ancestors had pushed the troubles of France to the limit; sadly for him the cup shattered in his hands and he was left in charge of all the shards. I could add that without the perversity of his court he might have been a virtuous king. One only has to remember that he hated grandees; that he was able to force them to pay their debts; that he was the only one of our tyrants who did not entertain

7 Written as a letter to the Convention on 16 December 1792 and then produced as a placard liberally posted around Paris this text was disregarded by the Convention, derided by those who believed that de Gouges was merely attempting to steal the limelight and vilified by others who saw in her words nothing but overt royalism. De Gouges produced three further texts in response to this negative reaction: *Mon dernier mot à mes chers amis*; *Adresse au don Quichotte du Nord*; *Arrêt de mort que présente Olympe de Gouges contre Louis Capet*. In her defence of Louis XVI de Gouges expresses her customary fair-mindedness, in her understanding of the Convention's Parisian bias her shrewdness and in her plea for exile rather than death her pacifism.

8 Louis Hercule Timoléon de Cossé-Brissac was a politician, a courtier and commander in chief of the King's Constitutional Guard. He was killed with other prisoners in Versailles on 9 September 1792. Arnaud II de La Porte was Minister of the Marine and Minister of the Royal Household; he fled France in 1789 but returned to serve the King before being arrested and executed for treason against the Revolution in August 1792. Both were involved in responding to a letter sent by de Gouges to Marie-Antoinette in which she asked the Queen to contribute towards the funding of a female cortege; both had been executed. Fearing that her letter might be found among the men's papers de Gouges made the correspondence public to pre-empt any criticism of her republicanism.

9 *Compte moral rendu*, de Gouges's spirited response to a Jacobin attack elicited by her *Pronostic*, was printed in mid-November 1792.

10 Chrétien-Guillaume Lamoignon de Malesherbes (1721 - 1794) trained as a lawyer but never practised; acted as a liberally-minded midwife to many important Enlightenment texts (the *Encyclopédie*, many of Rousseau's works etc.) when he controlled the *Librairie*, the government's censorship of all printed publications; was a minister twice, and, passionate in his belief in freedom of expression, he wrote copious lucid *Memoires* that directly confronted the monarch with the difficulties faced by France before 1789. He believed that any man should have a fair trial; doubting that this would be the case for Louis XVI he offered his services, in the full understanding of their limited value, because, having accepted to work for the crown in the past (in government) he saw only ignominy in refusing to work for it at this parlous time. He was virtually alone in this belief. He knew the risks and believed that his life would be endangered but being elderly he accepted the danger; he believed his two beloved daughters would be safe due to their sex. In this he was wrong. In 1794 he was made to stand beside the guillotine and watch as his grand-daughter and her husband were executed, followed by his daughter (her sister had fled), before he himself was dispatched. His son-in-law had been guillotined a few days earlier and his sister was executed a few days later.

courtesans, and whose manners were unspoilt. He was weak, he was misled; he misled us, he misled himself: there in a few words is his suit.

Citizen president, I will not reveal here my reasons for justifying his defence. I wish only to be accepted by the convention and by Louis Capet to second an elderly man, almost eighty years old, in a painful job that seems to me to warrant the full strength and courage of greener years. No doubt I would not have entered the fray alongside such an advocate if the cold and equally selfish egotism of Mister Target had not enflamed my heroism and excited my sensibility.¹¹ I can die right now: one of my republican plays is about to be performed.¹² If my light is extinguished at this moment, a moment that may glorify me, and if, after my death, principles still hold sway, my memory will be blessed and my disabused assassins will shed a few tears on my tomb.¹³ My zeal may seem suspect to Louis Capet; his infamous courtiers have undoubtedly missed no opportunity to create in his mind an image of me as a cannibal desperate for blood, but how wonderful it is to disabuse in such a way an unfortunate man lacking in support.

May I be permitted to present, to the national convention, an opinion that I thought worthy of all its attention.

Does Louis the Last threaten the republic more than his brothers, or his son? His brothers are still united with the foreign powers and only work on their own behalf. Louis Capet's son is innocent, and will survive his father. These pretenders, will they not engender many centuries of divisive factions? The English occupy a place in history that is quite different to the Romans: the English dishonoured themselves in the eyes of posterity by putting to death Charles I: the Romans immortalised themselves by exiling Tarquin. But true republicans always had vastly superior maxims to those of slaves. In order to kill a king it is not enough to cut off his head; he lives on long after his death; he is only truly dead once he has survived his fall. I will stop here to allow the convention to reflect on all the ideas that I have brought to its attention.

And I will also submit some observations to you, my fellow citizens. Let us abjure a reasonable resentment to remember that clemency always brings honour to the victors. It must be presumed that if the national convention is reduced to declare against Louis Capet, it will, in its wisdom, only pronounce the death sentence after first having it sanctioned by the eighty-three *départements* and by our armies, as it decreed in the new constitution. Given that Paris is only a tiny fragment of the French republic the convention will find this sanction all the more indispensable. It is said that the members of the convention should be forced to vote, by name, for the sentence of death on the guilty party

11 Guy Jean-Baptiste Target (1733 - 1807) was a lawyer who came to fame defending Cardinal Rohan during the infamous diamond necklace trial. He was influential in the creation of the 1791 constitution. He refused to defend Louis XVI at his trial, an action that was deemed cowardly rather than politically astute by many at the time. François Denis Tronchet (1726 - 1806) accepted the brief and survived, returning to public life after the fall of Robespierre. He participated in creating the Code civil under Napoleon.

12 *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles ou les vivandiers* was given its first performance at the Théâtre de la République on 23 January 1793, the day after Louis XVI's execution. The play was poorly received and its author was pursued backstage by an angry mob who reviled her attempt to defend Louis Capet. On the following evening the play's second, and last, performance was fatally interrupted for the same reasons. Thanks to a toxic mix of theatrical egos and political intrigue the play never resurfaced except as yet another example of its author's ineptitude, despite being publicly supported by authors such as Mercier and de Cubières. De Gouges, in response to the fiasco, printed the text in full and sent examples to the Convention, the Committee for Public Instruction and various newspapers in the hope of redressing the balance in favour of a play that she felt supported and consolidated the republican government.

13 The fear of assassination was not hyperbole; a few days after this placard was pasted up in public a band of armed angry men came to de Gouges's home and called for her to come out. This she did. Derision and insult followed until one of their number, armed with a sword, grabbed her and held her down by the neck. Sword raised he asked the crowd for a price on her head. De Gouges replied with courageous calm that she would pay the highest price for the privilege. Laughter diffused the threatening situation and de Gouges, pride intact, retired unharmed.

but, if I must speak from the heart, I believe that no true republican will vote for his death, and that the majority will be in favour of exile.

Louis Capet's greatest crime, it must be conceded, was to be born a king at a time when philosophy was silently laying the foundations of the republic. We have abolished royalty. People, throne: he has lost everything. Let us be generous enough to leave him his life. If he had been the victor we might all be royalists; men are so subjugated by circumstances! By dethroning him we have shattered all the sceptres of the world: the sovereignty of the people has taken back its rights; we should not punish him for the ignorance of our ancestors or the crimes of his. If, as king, he sought, through the perfidy of his peers, to safeguard his prerogatives which have been, successively, the source of civil war and the caprices of men, he was fulfilling his role. Let us be republicans in exiling Louis Capet, and let all the potentates tremble! After this show of heroism what nation will dare arm itself, in the defence of tyrants, against a magnanimous people who can conquer and forgive?

N.B. [To Avis Pressant] What crimes does calumny not invent in order to defame blameless and unblemished souls! Citizen Feydel informed me that a man, who refused to name himself, had told him that he had seen me with an individual implicated in the making of false *assignats*.¹⁴ I call upon this citizen to tell me this man's name for I am too much an enemy of crime and not knowledgeable enough to hazard a guess. But in the circumstances that we find ourselves I could not overstate the attempts that have been made to tarnish my reputation: I have already been called Louis XV's daughter. There are no fables or absurdities that have not been brought into the world on my account; even about my private life!

Prudes, that is to say gossips with any amount of dalliances, have given me lovers in the Constituent Assembly, the Legislative Assembly and even right up to the Convention. Truly, I may have made a few conquests but I declare than no legislator conquered me. Without false modesty I believe I can openly admit that I cannot see that there is any man worthy of me: this confession, as proud as it is simple, is a profound truth. I am not complaining of my supposed birth nor of the lovers I have been allotted, but I ask citizen Feydel, as a true Republican, to point out to me the man who claims to have seen me with the maker of false *assignats*. It is not for my sake that I insist he explains himself as a point of honour but exclusively for the interests of society and the Republic.¹⁵

14 Gabriel Feydel (1750? - 1820?), journalist, first published under the pseudonym Nicolas Roger in 1783, sending letters to numerous journals. Both de Gouges and her friend Louis-Sébastien Mercier believed him to be part of the editorial team on the *Journal de Paris*. During the Revolution he produced his own paper, *L'Observateur* which sold well possibly because he was not averse to being economical with the truth in order to achieve a scoop. He was outlawed for a time in 1794 and survived as a travelling salesman until it was safe to return to Paris and his literary career.

Assignats were a form of paper money introduced in vast quantities by the government after 1789 in an attempt to control the country's debt and budgetary deficits. The system, created by deputies with legal rather than financial backgrounds, was a disaster causing inflation alongside a formidable depreciation of the *assignats'* value. By 1795 an *assignat* with the face value of 1,000 *livres* was worth just 80.

15 If de Gouges seems somewhat insistent on this subject it is because she knew that in the contemporary climate of suspicion and fear such false claims could easily lead to imprisonment at the behest of the Committee of General Security, soon to become infamous for policing the *Terreur*.