

AVIS PRESSANT,
OU
RÉPONSE A [sic] MES CALOMNIATEURS.

An Urgent Notice, or a Response to my Calumniators.¹

The state is ruined; it waits for its salvation from the French elite, or at least from those that are the wisest and most respected in the Kingdom. The Nation is troubled by internal discord. Tempers are rising, insistent once again, and all is becoming hopeless.

At such a time we must cast our eyes on a man exiled from his motherland. Did he merit this treatment? If he is innocent could he not instruct the Nation on the major projects that should cast light on the true interests of the State? Why has M. de Calonne not been called to the Estates General? Why is he neither condemned nor justified? Who, other than him, could unite minds? Who surpasses M. de Calonne in the art of important negotiations? Is he not the one who discovered the deficit? Did he not call for the Notables; and did not the Notables call for the Estates General? Why is the Nation, in turn, not calling for M. de Calonne; and why is M. Necker not calling for him himself?²

Will we see, for the first time, two great antagonists fly one behind the other to save the Motherland and the State? If this were to happen would it not be a memorable lesson?

Does M. Necker want to be more than a King in his position, as his enemies assure? No, his probity is foolproof; he is hiding his true virtue under a cloak of modesty.

M. Necker is a fine economist, yet with all his other qualities, it seems to me that he has served only when situations were urgent.

M. de Calonne, as a true statesman, has worked (for the time) if the Nation, stripped of maliciousness, would finish what he has sketched out, like those famous Painters whose works are still the jewels of that poverty-stricken ancient Rome, and which nonetheless still attract attention from the four corners of the World.³

Such is my opinion; the all-powerful Minister cannot outweigh the disgraced Minister; I may be wrong, but no personal interest is guiding me; my conscience is as clear as the brightest day: what might have made me happy in another century is the cause of my suffering in this one.

I have only very succinct ideas regarding politics, but it seems to me that in these circumstances it is not a case of quoting Montesquieu or Jean-Jacques, or of creating new Laws; they only need to be supported, abuses must be banished, and the national debt cleared.⁴ These, I think, are the important subjects that should have been dealt with, that should have been occupying the Nation a while ago.

1 Written in May 1789 this pamphlet was a response to de Gouges's critics who accused her of either being too republican or too royalist. In reality her moderate political views were informed by her profound pacifism. She was also criticized for exposing herself as a woman writer; using a male pseudonym and avoiding personal references would have been considered preferable but, for de Gouges, writing was a political act. Having the freedom to express her opinions in public irrespective of her sex and encouraging other women to step into the public domain alongside men were irrefutable rights in her view.

2 Charles Alexandre Calonne (1734 – 1802) and Jacques Necker (1732 – 1804) were separately called upon by Louis XVI to be the kingdom's Controller of Finance. Both men attempted reforms which failed due to the nation's huge debts and the impasse trying to raise revenue through taxation, both were sacked and for a period left France, Necker to his natal Switzerland and Calonne to England where he was at the time this pamphlet was published.

3 In the original French de Gouges writes '...si la Nation, dépouillée de toute personnalité..' : I have assumed that she is using 'personnalité' to mean a wounding statement (an outdated usage now but current in the 17th and early 18th centuries) and not individuality or character. I find the syntax of this sentence impenetrable so I have left it as in the original including the parentheses that seem out of place (possibly an example of one of the typographical errors de Gouges often complained of).

4 Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1788).

What evil-minded spirit denigrates this essential work? What venomous serpent goads all hearts? What roaring lion inflames all heads? What furious demon has produced this general ferment? No more quiet, no faith left in the bosom of unity or in the most beautiful hopes; we must get ready to cut each other's throats.

Ah! If my feeble voice could reach as far as the feet of the Throne, if the Nation could hear it without crying out against my sex, it would offer a simple and salutary solution, a solution that I had proposed to several Deputies; they should suspend their duties for a month or six weeks. This truce would allow the overheated heads to calm down, would allow new ideas to flower in the provinces, and give time for their Deputies to receive new, wiser and more accommodating, powers.

Should the Estates-General be dissolved there is no denying the alarm that would instantly spread throughout the Kingdom; all would be lost and barbarism would follow on from the century of selfishness.

What! The prosperity of the French is in the hands of the Nation, and the Nation is going to put a dagger into the hands of every Frenchman unless there is a swift resurgence of patriotism in these Assemblies!

Let the Nation cast her eyes on the unhappy People; let her consider the affliction of the Monarch and the public consternation; let her finally shudder at the horrors without number that these dissensions can create.

The poor in despair, joined by dishonourable villains, will indiscriminately attack the three Orders throughout France, and in the middle of this appalling butchery, it will be too late for the Nation to regret not having united for the common good.

Nothing is easier than to enflame minds, but when the ferment has made great strides, nothing is harder than to stop its progress.

A work that only exhales patriotism is not in favour these days, only the scorching pens and mean works that enflame both the hearts and the minds of Citizens have any following.

Have these incendiary writings produced anything useful? The loss of the State, the People and the Great and the Good. These seditious writings have been read and they have led the public astray.

Yes, I maintain that Men of Letters are a danger to States; at times they bring them down, although if a love of doing good guided their pens they could just as well contribute to their prosperity.

If a man is judged by his writings, by his actions, then no doubt my maxims, and I dare say my decency, will not escape the attention of all true French people.

Herein, it seems to me, are truths that the wise will approve and that the foolish will not fail to distort in their own way.

I cannot be stopped by these unreasonable clamours; I have gone too far to turn back now, I must display my opinions in broad daylight; I must justify myself; I am obliged to and I appeal to everyone to be my witness.

Public opinion can at times be frivolous but, in general, it is fair.

It is this opinion that encourages me; its approbation is worth more than any calumny.

Thoughtless men, to counteract the public appreciation that I obtained from my patriotic writings, tell everyone that I have had many lovers; what a particularly novel and meaningful idea.

Again I am obliged to repeat that being a widow at sixteen years of age and finding myself mistress of my own fate, I was more vulnerable than most but, amidst the reefs that surrounded me, I saw an honourable career appear and I rushed into it full of courage; the path was strewn with thorns and just as I was going to pick a rose thanks to my feeble works, amiable Frenchmen, or truth to say, those who present its most

ridiculous aspects, wanted me to stay forever young and only concern myself with my looks, to only think of pleasing and to totally renounce any interest in literature.

Fools state that my works are not my own and that I am stupid and arrogant enough to dress myself up in Peacocks' feathers for, apparently, my writings display too much strength and too much legal understanding to be the work of a woman.

Pitiful and ridiculous calumniators who have been taught to read; you certainly make the most of this beautiful gift, you have acquired so much knowledge that you are unable to see that every line of my writings bears the stamp of ignorance; but this ignorance can exist alongside a natural genius and without genius would instruction produce anything worthwhile? Just unbearable idiots and court parrots who, lacking any knowledge, make shallow judgements.

Relying solely on genius, I was able to make great discoveries and propose helpful projects. They can be modified but I hope they will be followed.

Is this the moment to defend myself against an unjust calumny? Where is the decent man who can claim to be exempt from the same? Who has not been attacked this century? Who is not calumniated these days?

But let us return to the danger I see threatening my motherland; nothing can stop me, I have declared myself in her favour and my determination is unshakeable.

Oh people of France! Oh Nation mine! Must I regret being born among you? No, this feeling cannot enter my soul. I want to convince you, I want to disarm my enemies, and if I myself do not gain any benefit from such recognition maybe, one day, a few passages from my feeble works will be quoted, in my motherland, and at least they will say: how much might she have achieved had she been educated?

Can the discovery that I was the first to show concern at the deplorable fate of the negroes be met with indifference?⁵

Is my patriotic purse project so badly received?⁶ Its implementation could be modified but I believe that it will have to be more or less executed as I suggested. No act is needed to impose this tax, nothing is required of the Estates General to give it the vigour it needs.

Whosoever is the first to contribute to this purse will see his name fly to posterity. This beautiful gesture befits a prince, or the best of citizens. I have no doubt that this patriotic zeal will be imitated in all of France, in less than six months, each according to his means.

Confidence is destroyed, only patriotism can remedy the most pressing problems; this tax must be seen as only transitory and of the moment.

Later the nation will work to find a way to impose a kind of tax that will not ruin the people yet will consistently provide for the State's expenditure. Here is all that I may offer to be useful to my nation. If it has no taste for my methods at least it will applaud the intentions that lie behind them.

It is even imputed that I had sold myself to the government. Must I make a declaration of my sacrifices! I have chosen not to sell my works, I have freely given them to the French people, I have sacrificed my health and my peace and quiet thanks to this patriotic ardour that has carried me towards this type of composition and yet I

⁵ De Gouges's anti-slavery play *L'Esclavage des Noirs* was performed on 28 December 1789 though the Comédie Française had received it in 1785 entitled *Zamore et Mizra ou l'heureux naufrage*; it was the one of the earliest works to cast a black man in the role of an honest, decent, enlightened hero and its writing predated the creation of abolitionist societies by several years. The 1788 edition of *Zamore et Mizra* included a courageous anti-slavery text, *Réflexions sur les hommes nègres*, written at a time when such ideas were unacceptable and roused the fury of vast swathes of the rich and powerful whose wealth and position were in part founded on the trade. De Gouges made no distinction between the enslavement of men in the colonies, the position of women and children in her society or the abuse of the elderly, the poor and the disenfranchised: she found all forms of oppression untenable.

⁶ See *Lettre au peuple* on www.olympedegouges.eu

admit to all the world that it is only my own purse that I have emptied and my own days that I have shortened: the cause is a beautiful one and precious to my eyes.

At least allow me this one virtue; it will always be my one glory and cannot be obscured or destroyed, either by envy or calumny. I expect no recompense from the government, whatever might be done to show an appreciation of good actions or to encourage my sex to higher merit. I have only two wishes before I die, to see France flower again, and to establish my patriotic theatre. However, I return to my more pressing course of action.

It will be pointless to write endless essays; our great Authors will be quoted in vain; I swear on my life that calm will only be restored if people are aroused by a rush of patriotic ardour. Only a wave of enthusiasm can save the State; these crises are known to be either favourable or pernicious among all people, especially the French.

In this disastrous situation let us compare ourselves to a respectable family; one child has managed his affairs poorly and brought the family into disrepute. Blood speaks, honour is engaged, and the family comes together with all its strength as one being; France is the mother of this family, the monarch is its good father, let us, like zealous children, anticipate their needs, let us unite to save us all at the same time, and let us only be fearsome to our enemies.

This is the urgent course of action that must be adopted; it is the only one that is left to us, can there be a more beautiful one?