

# Voltaire, “The English Constitution”

## From Voltaire’s *Letters on England* (1734)

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**CONTEXT:** *In 1726, Voltaire challenged a nobleman to a duel and was exiled to England after a brief imprisonment in the Bastille. While in England, Voltaire wrote several letters comparing its government, society, and culture with that of his native country.*

Active  
Reading

This mixture of different departments in the government of England; this harmony between the king, lords, and commons has not always subsisted. England was for a long time in a state of slavery, having, at different periods, worn the yoke of the Romans, Saxons, Danes, and, last of all, the Normans. William the Conqueror, in particular, governed them with a rod of iron. He disposed of the goods and lives of his new subjects like an eastern tyrant: he forbade, under pain of death, any Englishman to have either fire or light in his house after eight o’clock at night, whether it was that he intended by this edict to prevent their holding any assemblies in the night, or, by so whimsical a prohibition, had a mind to try to what a degree of abjectness men might be subjected by their fellow-creatures. It is, however, certain that the English had parliaments both before and since the time of William the Conqueror; they still boast of them, as if the assemblies which then bore the title of parliaments, and which were composed of the ecclesiastical tyrants and the barons, had been actually the guardians of their liberties, and the preservers of the public felicity....

While the barons, with the bishops and popes, were tearing all England to pieces... the people, I say, were considered by them as animals of a nature inferior to the rest of the human species. The commons were then far from enjoying the least share in the government; they were then [serfs] or slaves, whose labor, and even whose blood, was the property of their masters, who called themselves the nobility. Far the greatest part of the human species were in Europe—as they still are in several parts of the world—the slaves of some lord, and at best but a kind of cattle, which they bought and sold with their lands. It was the work of ages to render justice to humanity, and to find out what a horrible thing it was, that the many should sow while a few did reap: and is it not the greatest happiness for the French, that the authority of those petty tyrants has been extinguished by the lawful authority of our sovereign, and in England by that of the king and nation conjointly?

Happily, in those shocks which the quarrels of kings and great men gave to empires, the chains of nations have been relaxed more or less. Liberty in England has arisen from the quarrels of tyrants. The barons forced John Sans Terre and Henry III to grant that famous charter, the principal scope of which was in fact to make kings dependent on the lords; but, at the same time, the rest of the nation were favored, that they might side with their pretended protectors. This great charter, which is looked upon as the palladium and the consecrated fountain of the public liberty, is itself a proof how little that liberty was understood: the very title shows beyond all doubt that the king thought himself absolute, *de jure*; and that the barons, and even the clergy, forced him to relinquish this pretended right, only because they were stronger than he. It begins in this manner: “We<sup>1</sup>, of our free will, grant the following privileges to the archbishops, bishops, abbots, priors, and barons of our kingdom,” etc. In the articles of this charter there is not one word said of the house of commons; a proof that no such house then existed; or, if it did, that its power was next to nothing. In this the free men of England are specified—a melancholy proof that there were then some who were not so. We see, by the thirty-second article, that those pretended free men owed their lords certain servitude. Such a liberty as this smelled very rank of slavery. By the twenty-first article, the king ordains, that from henceforth officers shall be restrained from forcibly seizing the horses and carriages of free men, except on paying for the same. This regulation was considered by the people

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<sup>1</sup> The “Royal We,” used by monarchs and others in high office

as real liberty, because it destroyed a most intolerable kind of tyranny. Henry VII, that fortunate conqueror and politician, who pretended to cherish the barons, whom he both feared and hated, bethought himself of the project of alienating their lands. By this means the [peasants], who afterward acquired property by their industry, bought the castles of the great lords, who had ruined themselves by their extravagance; and by degrees nearly all the estates in the kingdom changed masters.

The House of Commons daily became more powerful; the families of the ancient peerage became extinct in time; and as, in the rigor of the law, there is no other nobility in England besides the peers, the whole order would have been annihilated had not the kings created new barons from time to time; and this expedient preserved the body of the peers they had formerly so much dreaded, in order to oppose the House of Commons, now grown too powerful. All the new peers, who form the upper house, receive nothing besides their titles from the crown; scarcely any of them possessing the lands from which those titles are derived. The duke of Dorset, for example, is one of them, though he possesses not a foot of land in Dorsetshire; another may be earl of a village, who hardly knows in what quarter of the island such a village lies. They have only a certain power in parliament, and nowhere out of it, which, with some few privileges, is all they enjoy.

**Here is no such thing as the distinction of high, middle, and low justice in France; nor of the right of hunting on the lands of a citizen, who has not the liberty of firing a single shot of a musket on his own estate.**

A peer or nobleman in this country pays his share of the taxes as others do, all of which are regulated by the House of Commons; which house, if it is second only in rank, is first in point of credit. The lords and bishops, it is true, may reject any bill of the commons, when it regards the raising of money; but are not entitled to make the smallest amendment in it: they must either pass it or throw it out, without any restriction whatever. When the bill is confirmed by the lords, and approved by the king, then every person is to pay his quota without distinction; and that not according to his rank or quality, which would be absurd, but in proportion to his revenue. Here is no *taille*,<sup>2</sup> or arbitrary poll-tax, but a real tax on lands; all of which underwent an actual valuation under the famous William III. The taxes remain always the same, notwithstanding the fact that the value of lands has risen; so that no one is stripped to the bone, nor can there be any ground of complaint; the feet of the peasant are not tortured with wooden shoes; he eats the best wheaten bread, is well and warmly clothed, and is in no apprehension on account of the increase of his herds and flocks, or terrified into a thatched house, instead of a convenient slated roof, for fear of an augmentation of the *taille* the year following. There are even a number of peasants, or, if you will, farmers, who have from five to six hundred pounds sterling yearly income, and who are not above cultivating those fields which have enriched them, and where they enjoy the greatest of all human blessings, liberty.

**What comparisons does Voltaire make between England and his native country?**

<u>ENGLAND</u>	<u>FRANCE</u>

<sup>2</sup> A tax in France from which nobles were exempt

# From Abbe Sieyes, “What is the Third Estate?”

*A Political Pamphlet Written in January, 1789*

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**CONTEXT:** *In 1789, Louis XVI called for a meeting of the Estates General. The Estates General, which had not met in 175 years, was organized around the three estates (clergy, nobility, and everyone else) with each estate having one vote. The Third Estate, which made up 75% of the population, could be overruled on any question where the First and Second Estates were in agreement. Sieyes, himself a member of the clergy, sought to challenge this unfair system.*

The plan of this book is fairly simple. We must ask ourselves three questions:

Active  
Reading

*What Is The Third Estate? **Everything.***

*What Has It Been Until Now In The Political Order? **Nothing.***

*What Does It Wish to Become? **Something.***

What is necessary that a nation should subsist and prosper?  
Individual effort and public functions.

All **individual efforts** may be included in for classes:

1. [Agriculture] Since the earth and the waters furnish crude products for the needs of man, the first class, in logical sequence, will be that of all families which devote themselves to **agricultural labor**.
2. [Manufacturing/Production] Between the first sale of products and their consumption or use, a new manipulation, more or less repeated, adds to these products a second value more or less composite. In this manner **human industry** succeeds in perfecting the gifts of nature, and the crude product increases two-fold, ten-fold, one hundred-fold in value. Such are the efforts of the second class.
3. [Distribution] Between production and consumption, as well as between the various stages of production, a group of **intermediary agents** establish themselves, useful both to producers and consumer; these are the merchants and brokers: the brokers who, comparing incessantly the demands of time and place, speculate upon the profit of retention and transportation; **merchants** who are charged with distribution, in the last analysis, either at wholesale or at retail. This species of utility characterizes the third class.
4. [The Service Sector] Outside of these three classes of productive and useful citizens, who are occupied with real objects of consumption and use, there is also need in a society of a series of efforts and pains, whose objects are directly useful or agreeable to the individual. This fourth class embraces all those who stand between the most distinguished and liberal **professions** and the less esteemed **services** of domestics.

**Such are the efforts which sustain society. Who puts them forth? The Third Estate.**

**Public functions** may be classified equally well, in the present state of affairs, under four recognized heads; the **sword**, the **robe**, the **church** and the **administration**. It would be superfluous to take them up one by one, for the purpose of showing that **everywhere the Third Estate attends to nineteen-twentieths of them**, with this distinction; that it is laden with all that which is really painful, with all the burdens which the privileged classes refuse to carry. Do we give the Third Estate credit for this? That this might come about, it would be necessary that the Third Estate should refuse to fill these places, or that it should be less ready

to exercise their functions. The facts are well known. Meanwhile they have dared to impose a prohibition upon the order of the Third Estate. They have said to it: "Whatever may be your services, whatever may be your abilities, you shall go thus far; you may not pass beyond!" ...

... Is it not to be remarked that since the government has become the patrimony of a particular class, it has been distended beyond all measure; places have been created not on account of the necessities of the governed, but in the interests of the governing, etc., etc.? Has not attention been called to the fact that this order of things, which is basely and--I even presume to say--bestly respectable with us, when we find it in reading the History of Ancient Egypt or the accounts of Voyages to the Indies, is despicable, monstrous, destructive of all industry, the enemy of social progress; above all degrading to the human race in general, and particularly intolerable to Europeans, etc., etc? But I must leave these considerations, which, if they increase the importance of the subject and throw light upon it, perhaps, along with the new light, slacken our progress.

It suffices here to have made it clear that the pretended utility of a **privileged order** for the public service is nothing more than a **chimera**; that with it all that which is burdensome in this service is performed by the Third Estate; that without it the superior places would be infinitely better filled; that they naturally ought to be the lot and the recompense of ability and recognized services, and that if privileged persons have come to usurp all the lucrative and honorable posts, it is a hateful injustice to the rank and file of citizens and at the same a treason to the public.

Who then shall dare to say that the Third Estate has not within itself all that is necessary for the formation of a complete nation? It is the strong and robust man who has one arm still shackled. If the privileged order should be abolished, the nation would be nothing less, but something more. Therefore, what is the Third Estate? Everything; but an everything shackled and oppressed. What would it be without the privileged order? Everything, but an everything free and flourishing. Nothing can succeed without it, everything would be infinitely better without the others.

It is not sufficient to show that privileged persons, far from being useful to the nation, cannot but enfeeble and injure it; it is necessary to prove further that the noble order does not enter at all into the social organization; that it may indeed be a burden upon the nation, but that it cannot of itself constitute a nation....

**What is a nation?** A body of associates, living under a common law, and represented by the same legislature, etc.

Is it not evident that the noble order has privileges and expenditures which it dares to call its rights, but which are apart from the rights of the great body of citizens? It departs there from the **common law**. So its civil rights make of it an isolated people in the midst of the great nation. This is truly *imperium in imperio*.

In regard to its political rights, these also it exercises apart. It has its special representatives, which are not charged with securing the interests of the people. The body of its deputies sit apart; and when it is assembled in the same hall with the deputies of simple citizens, it is none the less true that its representation is essentially distinct and separate: **it is a stranger to the nation**, in the first place, by its origin, since its commission is not derived from the people; then by its object, which consists of defending not the general, but the particular interest.

The Third Estate embraces then all that which belongs to the nation; and all that which is not the Third Estate, cannot be regarded as being of the nation.

What is the Third Estate?

It is the whole.