

Une Révolution Britannique? Covid-19 and the impetus for change

Daniel Gareth Duffy

On 20 June 1789, members of France's Third Estate, those who were neither nobles nor clerics, met in Saint-Louis, Paris, proclaiming that they would write a new French Constitution. Although a little melodramatic and pompous, they would go on to form the National Assembly and ultimately deliver the most far-reaching set of political, administrative, and judicial reforms ever to echo throughout the hallowed landscape of the Hexagon. Occurring amidst an acute financial crisis in France, few expected Louis XVI's misjudged attempts to raise funds to empower a band of young revolutionaries inebriated from reading the *philosophes*. Yet it did, and the French Revolution was born. Reflecting on such an upheaval can make us wonder whether, amidst a raging pandemic in a United Kingdom drowning in debt, a revolution could ever be possible here today in a country yet to experience its own epochal revolution.

France's Ancien Régime presented a complicated picture, noted for its quirky customs, inconsistencies, and competing jurisdictions. Divided into three dozen *généralités*, all with varying levels of autonomy and cultural diversity, the nation was organised along outdated lines predicated on historical and regional traditions that were too often prioritised over simplicity and efficiency. Centralised control remained irksome, and power was defined not by the rigid wording of an established Constitution, but by the ebbs and flows of power relationships between the monarch, the nobility, and the more assertive regional institutions, such as the *Parlements*. During periods of financial woe, a taxation system contracted out to private collectors, the *Farmers-General*, within a fiscal structure largely exempting the nobility and Church was unhelpful. Unsurprisingly, the revolutionaries' first priority was to address these.

Such inconsistencies are, however, not limited to the past. Ambiguity, similar to that which paralysed France, pervades our establishment. The government, using the *Coronavirus Act (2020)*, has “governed by ministerial decree since March,” argued Lord Sumption, in a nation supposedly shrouded within the protective layers of parliamentary sovereignty. This is alarmingly similar to the absolutist monarchies of old France. The Prime Minister's moves have prompted a backbench rebellion, with Steve Baker, a Conservative MP, lamenting that “the government is exercising draconian powers without parliamentary scrutiny”, concluding that “liberty dies like this.”

Issues of comprehensibility persist too. Similar to Ancien Régime France's system of quasi-devolution, devolved bodies in the UK vary significantly in power and application. Devolution has left England indivisible, rendering Westminster the sole authority over a heterogeneous and socially and

economically complex landscape. Being aligned with purely nationalistic agendas as opposed to practical considerations, devolution has been incorrectly applied. Cardiff, a city with closer economic ties to Bristol, is dictating policy in Denbighshire, a county home to commuters to Liverpool. Whilst authorities in Greater Manchester, with a population nearing three million and a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of approximately seventy billion pounds, cannot pass public health legislation, the Isle of Man, a Crown Dependency numbering eighty thousand with a GDP a little over five billion, can and has. These discrepancies have been noted. Germany's widespread provision of testing and low death rate (only eleven per one hundred thousand compared to sixty-two on the other side of the North Sea) has been attributed to its decentralised structures, such as using over a hundred local laboratories compared to the UK's use of a centralised three. These current constitutional arrangements cannot persist if we are to face the next major challenge with the robustness it demands. The fuel for a legal revolution is apparent; but what of the people?

Writing histories of the masses has always been problematic due to the dearth in source material. However, an undeniably discernible intellectual movement had emerged in France by the eighteenth century; that of the Enlightenment. Although largely a mental exercise of the elite, it provided the fuel and foundations upon which a revolution could claim political legitimacy. The National Assembly employed ideas of popular sovereignty and social contract theory from Rousseau, checks and balances from Montesquieu, and an aversion to Catholic hegemony from Voltaire. These ideas had precedence. Government ministers had attempted to institute more economically liberal policies, such as Anne Robert Turgot, the Finance Minister from 1774 to 1776, who famously tried to liberalise the grain trade. Proponents of religious liberty had too prevailed even before the Revolution with the *Edict of Versailles (1787)*, which guaranteed freedom of conscience to Protestants. Indeed, the remarks of Jacques Necker, a prominent statesman, in 1796 that monarchical authority “*needed to attach the growing power of public opinion to its own crumbling influence*” illustrate the fervour prickling France before the Revolution.

The similarities with the UK today are striking. The Brexit vote unearthed profound dissatisfaction with the establishment, a fervour underestimated until the charisma of Nigel Farage, a prominent Brexiteer, energised it. For UKIP to win four million votes in 2015 in a hitherto two horse race and for the Conservatives, the party of quaint villages, verdant hills, and swishing cricket bats, to later win in the post-industrial heartland of the North in 2019 just demonstrates how much we have changed. The fact that Mr. Johnson could command such a stunning victory after having illegally prorogued Parliament in a style more reminiscent of Charles I than a modern democrat illustrates how unmoved the populace is by these constitutional upsets and how desperately they seek change. For radical change, public engagement is fundamental. The hundreds of thousands who marched against Brexit, lockdown, and

racism, and the virulence with which we saw the statue wars unfold this summer is evidence of a politicised populace. There is clearly a public fervour at least open to the possibility of reform.

Upon seizing power, French revolutionaries quickly imprinted their mark on France. A spirit of liberty and calculated efficiency surfaced. *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789)* articulated fundamental and indivisible liberties. This was not mere hyperbole. Less than a month before the Declaration's promulgation in August 1789, feudalism, the staple of provincial France, had been abolished. Further attacks on provincial tradition became clear. In March 1790, the provinces were reorganised into eighty-three departments named after geographical features, such as rivers, to distance themselves from the past. Furthermore, ecclesiastical reform saw the confiscation of church property and its resale to cover government debts, with an oath of allegiance imposed on the clergy. Revolutionaries had only to abolish all internal customs barriers in October that year to truly homogenise France into one rationalised, economically singular entity under one authority in Paris. This would culminate with the Constitution of 1791, which constrained the monarch, outlined the logistics of a new democracy, and upheld freedom of expression. A legal revolution had taken place within only two years that had upended the political fabric of France.

After the pandemic, people will agitate for reform. Mired in a confused Westminster bubble, a paralysed government must acknowledge that decentralisation is paramount. Unlike the French centralising tendencies in the 1790s, however, power will move centrifugally. The leadership shown by the devolved administrations will only accentuate their distance from centralised control. Other regions will follow. Indeed, people will invariably trust a local authority speaking their language more than a Westminster circle that has consistently failed to embrace reality. This zeal for change today will result in fundamental constitutional reform, as it did with French revolutionaries. Key to the French demands was efficiency on a level that Louis XVI did not possess. With an unwritten constitution in this country silent on some major questions, reform will be sought. It is unacceptable that a package of regulations can be delivered so quickly, change so frequently, and apply so selectively without any substantial legal reference points. Constitutional reform would articulate which areas of governance Westminster controls and which it should leave to others, and it would entrench the hitherto unspoken contract with the people by clearly outlining the government and the populace's respective responsibilities.

Reform will come at an administrative level too. As Professor Chris Whitty and Sir Mark Vallance flanked Mr. Johnson at daily press briefings, the image of a technocratic civil service where expertise is valued can only solidify. Indeed, Dominic Cummings, the Prime Minister's Chief Advisor (and a calculating radical uncannily similar to Maximilien Robespierre), has already been peddling a technocratic agenda designed to upend the Civil Service. Some reform has already come; Public Health England will be disbanded for alleged failings (though its responsibility for these failings is

questionable). Further issues, such as the complications and inadequacies of the furlough scheme, where companies have retained staff whose labour is no longer required, will need to be addressed. In the same way as mass levies and the *certificates de civisme* (essentially citizen's proof of allegiance to the state) kept the French population in check, the government of today will have to coordinate their administrative network to construct a more organised fiscal, legislative, and political framework. This will only come with pressure from below when people begin to question the failings during this pandemic.

Revolutions occur when a government fails to adapt and when an irate populace has the ideas to articulate and the means to deliver a new vision of society. As such, however, violent revolution in this country is unlikely. The government is starting to recognise its flaws and is responding accordingly. With a first-past-the-post system and a government boasting a majority of eighty, an early election where radicals could emerge is unlikely. However, that does not preclude change. Most of the French revolutionaries' activities in the early years were largely peaceful. Although others exerted their views a little more loudly, such as the peasant rebellions in the summer of 1789 and the attack on the Palace of Versailles in October, the Revolution began as a legal corrective to years of failings. Such legal change can emerge swiftly without much announcement; the same could occur here. Indeed, such reform is desirable. How can we respond to the next hurdles without the legal and administrative foundations to surmount them?

However, violence, destruction, and incivility must be avoided. After a relatively peaceful first few years, war with monarchical powers in Europe, the alleged threat of nobles and *émigrés*, and mass agitation amongst the popular classes provoked revolutionaries to unleash the chilling period of mass executions now immortalised as the Terror. Although inconceivable today, the narrative of the state being the sole intellectual and political authority will ostracise those who fail to conform. To prevent this, we must, first, understand that we are not at war with the virus. Such language simply justifies draconian measures and militarises the government's response; only with reasoned discourse and compassion can we surmount this pandemic without resorting to Churchillian analogies. Second, we must end this denunciatory culture nearing the hallmarks of a police state (which too featured markedly in French revolutionary discourse). Finally, this pandemic must not, even if it lays the foundations for a more legally comprehensible and organised administration, leave a precedent for over-expansive and illimitable government. Let's not hand the reins of freedom to despots only too willing to ride it into an abyss. Just shy of the nineteenth century, the French would discover the perils of that with Napoleon Bonaparte.

Originally published in the Flete on 14/10/2020.

Bibliography

Campbell, D. 'Ministers criticised over plan to scrap Public Health England,' *The Guardian* 16/08/2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/aug/16/ministers-criticised-over-plan-to-scrap-public-health-england>

Evans, A. 'Coronavirus Act: UK has been 'governed by decree' since March, warns Lord Sumption', *inews*, 29/09/2020. <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/coronavirus-act-uk-2020-brady-amendment-vote-governed-decree-lord-sumption-666924>

Heitmueller, A. and Roemheld, L. 'Covid-19 and the false dichotomy between centralised and decentralised healthcare systems.' *British Medical Journal* 05/08/2020 <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/08/05/covid-19-and-the-false-dichotomy-between-centralised-and-decentralised-healthcare-systems/>

'History Faculty Reading Lists – Revolution and Empire in France, 1789-1815,' *Oxford University* (2020)

Lucas, C. (ed.) *Documents on the French Revolution* (1987)

Manchester, Centre for Cities. <https://www.centreforcities.org/city/manchester/>

'National Income – Isle of Man Government,' *The Official Isle of Man Government Website* <https://www.gov.im/about-the-government/departments/cabinet-office/economic-affairs-division/national-income/>

Sophy Ridge: 'This is how liberty dies', says Steve Baker MP, Sky News. 27/09/2020. <https://news.sky.com/video/sophy-ridge-this-is-how-liberty-dies-says-steve-baker-mp-12083185>