

Common Sense and Its Effects

Thomas Paine at first intended to publish *Common Sense* in the form of a series of newspaper articles, but was persuaded by Dr Benjamin Rush, with whom he had made friends through their common opposition to slavery, that it would be more effective as a pamphlet. He entrusted it to the Philadelphia firm of printers, Robert Bell, on the understanding that the profits should be divided between them. Paine did not wish to make any money for himself but proposed to devote his share of the profits to buying mittens for Washington's troops. An edition of a thousand copies was printed and priced at two shillings a copy or eighteen shillings a dozen. It appeared, most probably, on 10 January 1776, and was immediately sold out. When Bell nevertheless denied that there were any profits, Paine broke with him and offered the work, augmented by an appendix and a rejoinder to Quaker criticism of the original text, to a rival Philadelphia firm of William and Thomas Bradford. They printed seven thousand copies, which they priced at a shilling apiece, and published on 14 February 1776. Bell claimed that he had been unjustly treated and published a second edition on his own, but the Bradford version prevailed. Both were anonymous, though the pamphlet, only on its first appearance, was described as 'written by an Englishman'.

The success of the pamphlet was extraordinary. Paine, who always denied that he made any money out of it, claimed that 120,000 copies were sold within three months. This may be an exaggeration, but it seems to be generally agreed that fifty-six editions had been printed and 150,000 copies sold by the end of 1776. It is also a matter of general agreement that the pamphlet played a decisive part in persuading the representatives of the colonists to commit themselves to independence.

How did Paine achieve it? More by rhetoric, of which he was a master, than by force of argument. His arguments are on two levels, not always kept distinct. In part they are designed to prove the superiority in general of representative over monarchical or aristocratic forms of government. Here the thrust of the reasoning is mainly negative. The emphasis is laid rather on the evils of any form of hereditary government, especially monarchy, than on the merits of representative government, though Paine does use the argument that it will prove convenient 'to leave the legislative part to be managed by a select number chosen from the whole body, who are supposed to have the same concerns at stake which those have who appointed them, and who will act in the same manner as the whole body would act were they present'.¹ Evidently this argument applies only to a small and harmonious electorate. Paine makes a faint attempt to cope with this difficulty by proposing that as the electorate increases, constituencies should be multiplied and elections held more frequently, but already there is a narrow limit to the practicability of these reforms, unless we shift to a much greater degree of decentralization than anything that Paine envisages.

The remainder of Paine's arguments advance the propositions that whatever may have been the case in the past, the Americans cannot now afford not to break with England, and that the chances of their doing so successfully are currently as great as they are ever likely to be. This line of attack is not incompatible with the first, since if the case for representative government were conclusively made out, it might be possible to show that England could never be in a position to endow the colonists with it in an acceptable form, but Paine shows some disposition to contrast them. For example, in an article written in 1778, one of the series collectively called *The Crisis*, he writes that when he first came to America, the colonists' 'idea of grievance operated without resentment, and their single object was reconciliation'. He himself 'had no thoughts of independence or of arms'. 'But when the country, into which I had just set my foot, was set on fire about my ears, it was time to stir. It was time for every man to stir. Those who had been long settled had something to defend, those who had just come had something to pursue; and the call and the concern was equal and universal.' And in *Common Sense* itself he goes even further.

No man was a warmer wisher for reconciliation than myself, before the fatal nineteenth of April 1775,² but the moment the event of that

¹ *Common Sense*, p. 67.

² Date of the 'massacre' of Lexington.

day was made known, I rejected the hardened, sullen tempered Pharaoh of [George III] for ever; and disdain the wretch, that with the pretended title of FATHER OF HIS PEOPLE can unfeelingly hear of their slaughter, and composedly sleep with their blood upon his soul.¹

Even in the more general section of his polemic, Paine does not clearly distinguish between the defects of monarchy and aristocracy, in whatever form, and the demerits of the English 'Constitution', as it actually functions. On the whole, it is the second to which he pays the greater attention. Thus, having allowed the English Constitution some merit as having been in its time an alleviation of tyranny, Paine attacks it both for being too complex and for allowing far too large an element of tyranny to survive. It is present in the influence of the king; it is present in the influence of the peers. In both cases their holding hereditary office is said to make them independent of the people. Consequently, the freedom of England depends only on the virtue of the members of the House of Commons whom Paine describes, not altogether accurately, as 'the new republican materials'.

It is a little surprising that Paine failed to remark the distorted sense and the very limited degree to which the members of the House of Commons did, at that date, represent the English people.² The exclusion of women and the relatively high property qualification reduced the number of those eligible to vote at all to a very small proportion, and the archaic distribution of constituencies not only excluded voters who would otherwise have been qualified but ensured that many 'representatives of the people' were no more than the nominees of local magnates or landlords. It was not until 1832 that Rotten Boroughs were done away with, at least ostensibly, in the First Reform Bill, though this did not much augment the electorate, or do away with electoral malpractices, or, at least in rural constituencies, put an end to the dominance of the landlords, and it was not until nearly a century later that the English people were granted anything approaching universal suffrage. Paine himself wrote at least one article in defence of the rights of women but he did not go so far as to suggest that this should include the right to vote, and he seems at first to have been in favour of some property qualification for male voters in the United States, though it would not have been set so high as its English counterpart.

¹ *Common Sense*, p.92.

² He does subsequently make this point in his *Rights of Man*.

Another point of which one might have expected Paine to make more than he does is the dependence of members of the House of Commons not only on their patrons, many of whom were in the House of Lords, but also on the Crown. He does not overlook the point entirely. Having deduced from the simile of a machine that whatever power in the constitution has the most weight will eventually govern, he continues:

That the crown is this overbearing part in the English constitution needs not be mentioned, and that it derives its whole consequence merely from being the giver of places and pensions is self-evident, wherefore, though we have been wise enough to shut and lock a door against absolute monarchy, we at the same time have been foolish enough to put the crown in possession of the key.¹

In fact the monarchy did not, even then, derive its whole consequence from being the giver of places and pensions. The blind adulation of the English royal family may indeed be a comparatively recent product of the frivolity of television and certain sections of the press, but Shakespeare's 'There's such divinity doth hedge a king' always had some basis in popular attitudes, even when the monarch was personally disliked. What is important is that this attitude is independent of the extent to which the monarch actually participates in politics. It was the existence of a 'King's party' in Parliament at the time of the American Revolution on which Tom Paine might have done better to lay stress.

One reason why he did not dwell on this point may have been that his reference to places and pensions occurs in his conclusion to a long argument in which he denies the virtue attributed to the English Constitution as a system of checks and balances, not so much on the ground that it merely masks the dominance of the monarch, as on the ground that the notion of the different powers acting as checks on one another is farcical. In fact Paine ignores the function of the House of Lords, whatever that might have been intended to be, and concentrates upon the King and the Commons. His argument proceeds as follows:

To say that the commons is a check upon the king, presupposes two things.

First. — That the king is not to be trusted without being looked after, or in other words, that a thirst for absolute power is the natural disease of monarchy.

¹ *Common Sense*, pp. 70–71.

Secondly. – That the commons, by being appointed for that purpose, are either wiser or more worthy of confidence than the crown.

But as the same constitution which gives the commons a power to check the king by withholding the supplies, gives afterwards the king a power to check the commons, by empowering him to reject their other bills; it again supposes that the king is wiser than those whom it has already supposed to be wiser than him. A mere absurdity.¹

This is in fact an argument against any form of bicameral or multicameral system and I do not think that it is cogent. For example, it seems to be desirable in any type of government that the judiciary act independently of the executive. This is not to imply that judges are in general wiser than those who put the laws into force but only that they are capable of fulfilling the important function of ensuring that the members of the executive do not overstep their constitutional powers. I do think it undesirable that the judges be chosen by the executive, though it is only if the judges also tend to be venal, which has for the most part appeared not to be the case, that I should call it an absurdity. Even so, the fact that the judges may be selected at least partly in virtue of their political opinions, and the fact that their tenure of office may outlast that of those who chose them, create dangers which have made themselves manifest in the recent history of the United States.

In criticizing Paine's argument, I do not wish to imply that the executive should not be subject to legislative control. On the contrary, I think that the growing tendency of the British Cabinet, or still worse, of a section within it, of the President of the United States and his entourage, and of the President of France, to take actions of moment without previously obtaining the authority of their parliaments is thoroughly objectionable. Of course, when a policy has been approved, a minister must be left free to carry it out in detail, aided or impeded by his civil servants. This differs from his running amok with orders in council; and it differs a great deal more from committing a country, more or less deviously, to military action and presenting its parliament with a *fait accompli*.

In this context, when I expressed a preference for a bicameral system, I had in mind a division of the legislature. I shall not digress

¹ *ibid.*, p. 69.

into the question how the members of these bodies should be chosen, beyond saying that I should very much prefer some form of proportional representation, possibly that of the transferable vote which was used in the elections to University Seats before the war, to the present method of electing members to the British House of Commons. I think that, in its limited way, the British House of Lords performs a useful function, and would do so even more if it were limited to Life Peers. Perhaps it is too much to hope that membership of the House will ever altogether cease to be open to purchase.

The difference between the political power of Queen Elizabeth II and that of George III, before he became incapable of exercising it, is so great that it would take us too far afield to discuss the merits and demerits of the survival of monarchy at the present time, in Great Britain or elsewhere. Paine's arguments were indeed directed primarily against the institution of monarchy in general rather than the particular misuse of the office ascribable to George III, but what he had in view in *Common Sense* was always absolute monarchy, or something approaching it, and what is also important, monarchy in which the rule of succession was hereditary. He left out of account the sorts of elective monarchy that existed in Denmark and in Poland, or for considerable periods in the Roman Empire, not that the Roman Empire, where the principal effect was to convey power to the legions, is a happy advertisement for the system.

Curiously, in view of the want of respect he was later to show for the Old Testament, the first argument that Paine brings against the institution of kingship is scriptural. After remarking that it took the Jews nearly three thousand years since the Mosaic date of the Creation to ask God for a king, he devotes an inordinate amount of space to pointing out first that Gideon declined the office and secondly that when the Jews renewed their request through the prophet Samuel, the Lord, after failing to dissuade his people by a discourse on the evils of kingship with which he supplied Samuel, succeeded in convincing them by a display of thunder and rain. It is probable that Paine was writing with an eye to his Puritan readership, though he may at that date not have been wholly insincere. In any case one of the numerous pamphleteers who commented, for the most part adversely, upon *Common Sense* was able to find scriptural passages in which the Lord expressed his approval of kingship.

In his attempt to enlist scriptural authority for his repudiation of kingship, Paine may also have been striking a glancing blow at the doctrine of the divine right of kings. The main weakness which he sees

in this doctrine is not, however, so much the lack of any evidence for it, as the fact that even if some person had been divinely appointed to reign over a nation, it would not follow that the same was true of any one of his descendants. Moreover, the same objection would hold good in a case where some person was chosen by a group of people to rule them. Here Paine was, consciously or unconsciously, in agreement with Locke who also held that no political contract could bind the descendants of those who made it, though we have seen that he diminishes the force of this principle by his doctrine of tacit consent. Paine also made much of the point that, however good a king might be, there was no guarantee that the same virtue would be found in his successor, a fact which also tells against entrusting power to hereditary peerage, or indeed, though Paine does not here take the argument so far, against hereditary privilege of any kind. In *Rights of Man*, which he was to publish in 1792, he argues that the concept of hereditary rule is 'as absurd as an hereditary mathematician, or an hereditary wise man; and as ridiculous as an hereditary poet¹laureate'.¹

Clearly this argument would retain its force even if the first in line of a series of hereditary rulers had displayed qualities which were especially suited to the part. But Paine denies that this can safely be assumed. His example of the descent of English kings from William the Conqueror is a good instance of his swashbuckling style. 'England,' he writes, 'since the conquest, hath known some few good monarchs, but groaned beneath a much larger number of bad ones, yet no man in his senses can say that their claim under William the Conqueror is a very honorable one. A French bastard landing with an armed banditti, and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original.'²

Having remarked that 'the most plausible plea, which hath ever been offered in favour of hereditary succession, is, that it preserves a nation from civil wars', he denounces this claim as 'the most barefaced falsity ever imposed upon mankind'.³ Once again he uses England as a counter-example, asserting that 'Thirty kings and two minors have reigned in that distracted kingdom since the conquest, in which time there have been (including the Revolution) no less than eight civil wars and nineteen rebellions.'⁴ These figures seem high to me, but Paine does not explain how he arrives at them.

¹ Paine, *Rights of Man*, Penguin Classics, p. 83.

² *Common Sense*, pp. 77-8.

³ *ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴ *ibid.*

His final verdict on monarchy is again reduced to its exemplification in the powers of George III. The phrasing is characteristically polemical.

In England a k[ing] hath little more to do than to make war and give away places; which in plain terms, is to impoverish the nation and set it together by the ears. A pretty business indeed for a man to be allowed eight hundred thousand sterling a year for, and worshipped into the bargain! Of more worth is one honest man to society, and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived.¹

Being committed to Republicanism Paine felt obliged to sketch the outline of a Constitution for the 'United States', a term he was apparently the first to use, not in *Common Sense* but in one of his *Crisis* articles. Its main features were that there should be only a single Assembly, that the representation of each of the thirteen colonies should be equal, amounting to at least thirty persons from each colony, that the Congress should meet annually, with a President chosen each year from a different colony successively so that all had their turn. He put this set of suggestions forward as one among others which were to be considered at a Continental Congress, convened in order to frame a Continental Charter. The members of this Congress were to be a committee consisting of twenty-six members of the existing Congress, that is, two from each colony, in addition to two representatives of each of the colonial assemblies, and five qualified citizens chosen in each colony by those who took the trouble to attend an election held in its capital city at an appointed date.

To the question where the King of America features in his scheme, Paine replies that in his America 'THE LAW IS KING'. He envisages a ceremony in which the Charter is crowned, and the crown is then demolished 'and scattered among the people whose right it is'.²

There is no evidence that Paine's suggestions were seriously considered either by the drafters of the Articles of Confederation, which were submitted to the States for ratification on 1 January 1777 and finally ratified by Maryland, the most recalcitrant of them, in 1781, or, what is more important, by the framers of the Constitution which superseded the Confederation, in a movement which was initiated by Virginia in 1785 and completed by Rhode Island in 1790, Delaware, New Jersey and Pennsylvania having taken the lead in 1787, North

¹ *Common Sense*, p. 81.

² *ibid.*, p. 98.

Carolina delaying until 1789, and the other eight States committing themselves together in 1788. It was too much to expect that the larger States should acquiesce in an equality of membership in the House of Representatives, but the adoption of a bicameral legislature enabled the principle of there being two delegates from each State, irrespective of its population, to obtain in the Senate. The chief departure from Paine's suggestions consisted in the tenure of offices, especially that of the President, who was to be elected for a period of four years, possibly increased by his re-election or by his having already come into office through the death of his predecessor, a progress normally due to his previous election as Vice-President. It is only quite recently, in reaction against Franklin Roosevelt's achievement in winning four successive Presidential elections, that the Presidents have become limited to a maximum of ten years in this office.

Paine's strongest arguments in favour of America's achieving her independence of England were that her 'parent country' was not England but Europe, not one third of her inhabitants being of English descent, that she would no longer be drawn automatically into English wars, particularly with France and Spain, and that she could trade freely with any country that she pleased. He is at his least convincing and also least interesting when he adduces figures to show that the comparative fiscal military and naval capabilities of England and America are such that the current moment is the most propitious for an American victory. He even falls into the inconsistency of claiming on one page that it is to America's advantage that she has no debts and on the next page recommending that she contract a national debt, adding that no nation should be without one. The trouble is that he was here arguing a weak case. I believe that even after refusing to make the reasonable concessions which would have enabled the American Tories, who favoured staying loyal to the Crown, to carry the day, the British government still had the resources to overcome its rebellious subjects. If they proved insufficient, it was mainly because of the incompetent generalship and diplomacy displayed in a cause which never commanded the wholehearted support of the Whig opposition in Parliament.

Paine concludes the appendix to his pamphlet with a plea for unity among the thirteen colonies and reconciliation between the Whigs and Tories in America. It is because it will put an end to the chief cause of dissension between them that he declares that 'Independance is the only BOND that can tye and keep us together.'¹

¹ *ibid.*, p. 121.

The rhetorical note on which the pamphlet might well have ended is struck rather earlier, before Paine embarks on his questionable statistics:

O ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose, not only the tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is over-run with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia, and Africa, have long expelled her. — Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.¹

The success of *Common Sense* may have ensured that the colonists would settle for nothing less than independence, but it did not give military strength to their cause. On the contrary, General Washington's army was on the defensive throughout nearly the whole of 1776. Very soon after the Declaration of Independence on 4 July, it was forced to give up New York and retreat across the Hudson to New Jersey. By that time Paine himself had enlisted, being attached to the Pennsylvania division of a body of militia drawn also from New Jersey and Maryland. He acted successively as secretary to one general and aide-de-camp, with the rank of Brigade-Major, to another, General Nathanael Greene. It was General Greene who first introduced Paine to Washington, under whom he served intermittently for the following two years, including a period in which he was paid to send regular reports to the President of the Pennsylvania Assembly.

The winter of 1776 found Washington's troops in such a miserable condition that even their commander expressed private doubts about their prospects. Reduced in number to five thousand, they suffered from a general shortage of supplies, especially clothing to protect them from the bitter weather. In these circumstances Paine published a series of pamphlets and articles collectively entitled *The Crisis*. A periodical with the same name, running to ninety-two numbers, including one entitled *Crisis Extraordinary*, a title which Paine was also to plagiarize, had appeared in London throughout the years 1775 and 1776. It supported the American cause, favouring independence after the American Declaration. Copies of it circulated in America, but they never had anything approaching the effect of Paine's *Common Sense*, and his usurpation of its title has led to its being largely overlooked.

Though in the end Paine had no qualms about this usurpation, he

¹ *Common Sense*, p. 100.

began by making a slight effort to avoid it. The first five pamphlets, which inaugurate *The Crisis* in his collected works, were published under the title *The American Crisis*. Afterwards he dropped the prefix, though some of the essays that might well have been included in the series were labelled 'Supernumerary' or 'Extraordinary'. Paine himself officially limited their number to thirteen, probably because of its accordance with the number of colonies, and issued them at irregular intervals from 23 December 1776 to 19 April 1783, the eighth anniversary of the battles of Lexington and Concord.

After the first five pamphlets, the essays took the form of newspaper articles which were reproduced in periodicals throughout the country. The collection owes its enduring fame almost entirely to the opening and closing sentences of its first number, the opening sentences being especially favoured in anthologies of American prose. They run as follows:

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it *now*, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly; it is dearness only that gives everything its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated.¹

The conclusion of the pamphlet is less celebrated but also eloquent:

By perseverance and fortitude we have the prospect of a glorious issue; by cowardice and submission, the sad choice of a variety of evils – a ravaged country – a depopulated city – habitations without safety, and slavery without hope – our homes turned into barracks and bawdy-houses for Hessians, and a future race to provide for, whose fathers we shall doubt of. Look on this picture and weep over it! and if there yet remains one thoughtless wretch who believes it not, let him suffer it unlamented.²

The mention of Hessians refers to the fact that a considerable portion of the British army consisted of German mercenaries. Since he

¹ See *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. M. C. Conway, vol. I, p. 170.

² *ibid.*, pp. 178–9.

presumably did not intend to put the virtue of American womanhood in question Paine must have been taking it for granted that these men fitted Burke's description of 'a rapacious and licentious soldiery' and would consequently be addicted to rape.

Apart from the fact that the final number of *The Crisis* begins by echoing the first with the words '“The times that tried men's souls” are over – and the greatest and completest revolution the world ever knew, gloriously and happily accomplished',¹ the essays that compose it do not contain very much of political or even literary interest. The main reason for this is that Paine was primarily an advocate, and that it must very soon have become clear to him that he had won his case. I should say that this was probable when General Burgoyne surrendered at Saratoga in October 1777, though the English army overran Georgia and South Carolina in 1780, and there may have been doubters or ardent Tories who thought that the issue was undecided until the defeat of Lord Cornwallis's army at Yorktown on 19 October 1781.

Presumably as a reward for writing *Common Sense*, Paine obtained official recognition in April 1777 by being appointed secretary to the Congressional Committee for Foreign Affairs. He held the position until January 1779 when he was forced to resign, in consequence of his having published an attack on Silas Deane, an American who had been sent as an emissary to Paris to obtain arms from the French. Deane joined forces with Pierre Beaumarchais, the enterprising author of *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, and they set up a private company for the transshipment of the arms, in payment for which they had obtained a million francs from Louis XVI. There then arose a dispute concerning Deane's entitlement to a monetary commission, in the course of which Arthur Lee, the American representative in London, accused Deane of dishonesty. Paine rallied vehemently to Lee, but the fact that France was supplying the Americans with arms, during one of the rare periods when she was at peace with England, was meant to be a secret and it was his revelation of the secret that cost Paine his appointment. He received 4,000 dollars for his services, though the money was withheld from him until 1783.

Having no other source of income Paine acted as secretary to a private citizen before being appointed clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly in November 1779. When his arrears of salary, amounting by then to 1,699 dollars, were paid to him on 7 June, Paine at once subscribed five hundred dollars of it for the relief of Washington's

¹ *Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 370.

currently hard-pressed army. His example was followed and by the end of the year a sum of three hundred thousand pounds had been raised by private subscription, making possible the establishment of a bank which was incorporated by Congress and supplied the army throughout the campaign.

This bank was the precursor of the Bank of North America which a committee of the Pennsylvania Assembly attempted to deprive of its charter in 1785. Paine came to its defence in a pamphlet entitled *Dissertations on Government: The Affairs of the Bank: and Paper Money*, which is thought to have been largely responsible for its preservation. The main motive of those who were seeking to destroy it was to increase the circulation of paper money, a tendency to which Paine was violently opposed. One of his arguments, which appears to be sound, is that the ease with which paper money is produced, compared with the relative difficulty of increasing the supply of gold and silver – a greater difficulty at that time than it is now, though not so much greater as to invalidate the comparison – acts as a stimulus to inflation, though there are grounds for suspecting that Paine thought of gold and silver as ‘real’ money in a way that paper could never be, ignoring the fact that anything whatever of which there is a sufficient quantity available can serve as a means of exchange, so long as those who employ it agree on its legitimacy.

The distrust of paper money was not just a quirk of Paine’s. It was widespread well into the nineteenth century and fostered by the collapse of ‘bubble schemes’. The concept of it is amusingly satirized by Thomas Love Peacock in *Calidore*, his Fragment of a Romance, most probably written in 1816. The character Calidore, a transplant from the court of King Arthur, goes to the Bank of England to exchange his gold Arthurs for contemporary English currency. He is presented with several slips of paper signed by one John Figginbotham and promising to pay the bearer £1,000. When he asks for these promises to be redeemed, it is explained to him that all he can hope to receive is more paper. ‘Assuredly,’ he says, ‘this Figginbotham must be a great magician, and profoundly skilled in magic and demonology; for this is almost more than Merlin could do, to make the eternal repetition of the same promise pass for its eternal performance, and exercise unlimited control over the lives and fortunes of a whole nation, merely by putting his name upon pieces of paper.’

Though I am old enough to remember talk of ‘Bradburys’, it is worth remarking that English banknotes of any denomination are not now known by the name of the Bank of England’s chief cashier. Even so I

suspect that a superstitious belief in the greater genuineness of the gold standard is not yet extinct. The fact remains that the science of economics, such as it is, has cast aside the prejudices of Peacock and Paine.

On 1 March 1780, the Pennsylvania Assembly passed an Act for the abolition of slavery within the State, entailing the emancipation of the six thousand slaves which it then contained. Pennsylvania was the first of the thirteen States to take this course. Notoriously its example was not followed by the Southern States, Virginia, Georgia and the Carolinas, nor by every one of the other States that were later admitted to the Union up to the time of the Civil War. On internal evidence, it is generally supposed that the preamble of this Pennsylvanian Act was composed by Tom Paine. It runs as follows:

When we contemplate our abhorrence of that condition, to which the arms and tyranny of Great Britain were exerted to reduce us, when we look back on the variety of dangers to which we have been exposed, and how miraculously our wants in many instances have been supplied, and our deliverances wrought, when even hope and human fortitude have become unequal to the conflict, we are unavoidably led to a serious and grateful sense of the manifold blessings, which we have undeservedly received from the hand of that Being, from whom every good and perfect gift cometh. Impressed with these ideas, we conceive that it is our duty, and we rejoice that it is in our power, to extend a portion of that freedom to others, which hath been extended to us, and release them from the state of thralldom, to which we ourselves were tyrannically doomed, and from which we have now every prospect of being delivered. It is not for us to enquire why, in the creation of mankind, the inhabitants of the several parts of the earth were distinguished by a difference in feature or complexion. It is sufficient to know that all are the work of the Almighty Hand. We find in the distribution of the human species, that the most fertile as well as the most barren parts of the earth are inhabited by men of complexions different from ours and from each other; from whence we may reasonably as well as religiously infer, that He, who placed them in their various situations, hath extended equally his care and protection to all, and that it becometh not us to counteract his mercies. We esteem it a peculiar blessing granted to us, that we are enabled this day to add one more step to universal civilization, by removing as much as possible, the sorrows of those who have lived in undeserved

bondage, and from which, by the assumed authority of the Kings of Great Britain, no effectual legal relief could be obtained. Weaned, by a long course of experience, from those narrow prejudices and partialities we had imbibed, we find our hearts enlarged with kindness and benevolence towards men of all conditions and nations; and we conceive ourselves at this particular period particularly called upon by the blessings which we have received, to manifest the sincerity of our profession, and to give a substantial proof of our gratitude.

And whereas the condition of those persons, who have heretofore been denominated Negro and Mulatto slaves, has been attended with circumstances, which not only deprived them of the common blessings that they were by nature entitled to, but has cast them into the deepest afflictions, by an unnatural separation and sale of husband and wife from each other and from their children, an injury, the greatness of which can only be conceived by supposing that we were in the same unhappy case. In justice, therefore, to persons so unhappily circumstanced, and who, having no prospect before them whereon they may rest their sorrows and their hopes, have no reasonable inducement to render their service to society, which they otherwise might, and also in grateful commemoration of our own happy deliverance from that state of unconditional submission to which we were doomed by the tyranny of Britain.

Be it enacted . . . etc.¹

Whether because of his composition of this preamble or for his services to the cause of American independence, most probably the latter in view of the date, the University of Pennsylvania awarded Paine the honorary degree of Master of Arts on 4 July 1780. This is the only academic honour that he is known to have received.

After publishing a pamphlet entitled *Public Good*, in which he successfully disputed the claim of the State of Virginia, based on a patent granted by James I in the year 1609 to the South Virginia Company, to incorporate all the territory lying between it and the Pacific Ocean, Paine accompanied John Laurens at his own expense on a mission to try to obtain more money from Louis XVI. Having acquired two and a half million livres they returned to America on a French frigate in June 1781.

Paine's secretaryship to the Pennsylvania Assembly had come to an

¹ *Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. II, pp. 29-30.

end, and as he made no profit out of his pamphlets he found himself in serious want of money. He overcame his pride so far as to appeal to General Washington for help, faintly reproaching the American authorities for their failure to remunerate him for his services, and declaring his design to settle in France or Holland. After consulting Robert Morris, his Superintendent of Finance, and Robert Morris's assistant, Gouverneur Morris, Washington decided, in a letter which all three men signed, to recommend to Congress that Paine should be awarded a salary of eight hundred dollars a year, paid by the Secretary of Foreign Affairs out of secret funds. It was thought that the secrecy would preserve the force of Paine's propaganda and remove any suspicion that he was expressing anything other than his own views. The response of Congress was to refer the question to a committee which recommended that Paine be appointed historiographer to the continent, but nothing came of it.

In September 1782 Paine published a reply to a history of the American Revolution, written by the Abbé Raynal and translated into English. The Abbé's main arguments were that no principle was at stake except the right of the mother country 'to lay, directly or indirectly, a slight tax upon the colonies' and that it was only because they had just made an alliance with France that the colonists rejected a British offer, communicated to them in April 1778, of everything for which they were asking, short of independence. Paine's rejoinder was that it was not just a question of a slight tax on tea but of complete subservience to the whim of the British government and that while the treaty with France may have been signed in Paris before the British proposals were made the proposals were rejected before knowledge of the treaty had reached America. On this second point Paine is inaccurate. In April 1778 the American Congress had declared its willingness to negotiate provided Great Britain had already withdrawn its armed forces or expressly acknowledged the independence of the States. When on 3 June 1778 the English Commissioners, who had been despatched to America, formally apprised Congress of the resolution to negotiate which had been adopted by Parliament in February, Congress merely referred them to the refusal which it had given in April, but it now said that the States would treat only as an independent nation. Since it also spoke of its having 'sound regard' to its treaties, and proof of the treaty with France had reached Yorktown on 2 May, the treaty may after all have helped to stiffen the American attitude, though I think that it would be a mistake to say that it turned the scale.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the letter is its correction of the Abbé's perfunctory reference to the military operations conducted by General Washington at Trenton in 1776 and Princeton in January 1777 and Paine's consequent detailed description of events in which he himself had taken part. He also pays an elaborate compliment to the good motives of the French in entering into an alliance with the United States. It may have been chiefly for this reason that the French government made him a present of three hundred dollars.

In spite of this bonus, Paine continued to be in financial straits. He had bought a small house at Bordentown in New Jersey, in order to be near his friend Colonel Joseph Kirkbride, who was also of Quaker origin, but this left him with little money to spare. He wrote in June 1783 to the President of Congress, Elias Boudinot, suggesting that something more was due to him for his services to the country but received no satisfaction and took no part in the ceremonies which were held at Princeton to celebrate the declaration of peace with England in September.

George Washington then again took up his case, writing to all the State Assemblies to remind them of what they owed to Paine and suggesting that they grant him some reward. Unfortunately Paine had chosen at that time, when the various States were inclined to reassert their sovereignties at the conclusion of the war, to maintain in his letters and pamphlets that there should be no sovereignty but that of the United States, with the result that only two States responded favourably to Washington's appeal. They, however, did so generously. In 1784 New York presented him with an estate of two hundred and seventy-seven acres and a handsome house at New Rochelle, and at the end of the year Pennsylvania voted him five hundred pounds.

Freed from financial anxiety, and having no immediate motive for continuing to write about politics, Paine was able to pursue his scientific interests. He was assisted by John Hall, a skilled mechanic, who emigrated from Leicester in 1785, carrying letters to Paine, and soon came to lodge with Colonel Kirkbride in Bordentown. Paine was concentrating his efforts on the construction of an iron bridge with only a single arch. An iron bridge, the first of its kind, with which Paine had nothing to do, had already been erected over the River Severn in 1779, but whereas it had a span of only 100 feet, Paine aimed at building a bridge which would have a span of 400 or even 500 feet. Apparently he had no hopes of getting it constructed in the United States, but thought that there were good prospects in England or in France. Another motive for visiting England was to see his parents. There is no evidence

of his fearing that his American activities would make trouble for him even with the British government.

In fact, he went first to Paris in May 1787 to display a model of his bridge to the French Academy of Sciences. It was admired, but no move was made to have the bridge constructed in France. Paine stayed in France until September, then made his way to Thetford only to discover that his father had died of smallpox in November 1786. He settled nine shillings a week on his mother, by which she was not in a condition to profit for very long, dying in May 1790 in her ninety-fourth year. Before returning to Paris in December 1787, for no obvious reason beyond that of cementing his friendship with Thomas Jefferson, who was serving there as the American Ambassador, he remained at Thetford, putting the finishing touches to a pamphlet entitled *Prospects on the Rubicon* in which he warns the British government against alienating Holland or renewing the war with France. His objections are basically moral:

When we consider, for the feelings of Nature cannot be dismissed, the calamities of war and the miseries it inflicts upon the human species, the thousands and tens of thousands of every age and sex who are rendered wretched by the event, surely there is something in the heart of man that calls upon him to think! Surely there is some tender chord tuned by the hand of its Creator, that struggles to emit in the hearing of the soul a note of sorrowing sympathy. Let it then be heard, and let man learn to feel that the true greatness of a nation is founded on the principles of humanity; and that to avoid a war when our own existence is not endangered, and wherein the happiness of man must be wantonly sacrificed, is a higher principle of true honour than madly to engage in it.¹

But Paine's arguments are also practical:

Independent of all civil and moral considerations, there is no possible event that a war could produce benefits to England or France, on the present occasion, that could in the most distant proportion recompense to either the expense she must be at. War involves in its progress such a train of unforeseen and unsupported circumstances, such a combination of foreign matters, that no human wisdom can calculate the end. It has but one thing certain

¹ *Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. II, pp. 194-5.

and that is increase of TAXES. The policy of European courts is now so cast, and their interests so interwoven with each other, that however easy it may be to begin a war, the weight and influence of interfering nations compel even the conqueror to unprofitable conditions of peace.¹

This has not turned out to be true in general. Victory in the two Great Wars of this century has indeed proved very costly to England, but the defeat of Napoleon, though it initiated a period of civil disturbance, did not impoverish the victors, nor have the Great Wars of this century brought material detriment to the United States. What chiefly led Paine astray was his antipathy to paper currency. It was summarized in his saying that 'the delusion of paper riches is working as rapidly in England as it did in America'.

Having delivered his warning to Pitt, Paine concentrated his energy upon the promotion of his bridge. He took out patents for it in England, Scotland and Ireland, persuaded an American merchant Peter Whiteside, who was living in London, to invest £620 in the enterprise, and, most importantly, discovered a firm of ironmakers, Walker Brothers, located at Rotherham in Yorkshire, who had the means and the skill to execute the work.

In view of what was to follow, it is fascinating to learn that on his tour of Yorkshire, in 1788, in search of a firm like Walker Brothers, Paine was accompanied by Edmund Burke. Not only that but Burke invited Paine to spend a week at his estate in Buckinghamshire. There was indeed no reason at that date why the two men should not have found each other congenial. Both men had advanced by their talents from humble origins. Both enjoyed and were skilful in debate. Burke's views had never been so radical as Paine's but we have noted that like other Whigs he had supported the cause of the American colonists and spoken eloquently on their behalf. There is no evidence of their continuing to meet after the Revolution broke out in France.

Surprisingly, Paine published nothing about the fall of the Bastille. His letters to Jefferson in Paris, written at fairly long intervals between September 1788 and 1789, are much more concerned with his bridge than with politics, though he does furnish Jefferson with an occasional item of political gossip, or criticism of the British government. For instance he writes on 12 March some time after the manifestation of George III's insanity which was to lead to the appointment of the Prince Regent:

With respect to political matters here, the truth is, the people are fools. They have no discernment into principles and consequences.

¹ *ibid.*, p. 195.

Had Mr. Pitt proposed a National Convention, at the time of the King's insanity, he had done right; but instead of this he has absorbed the right of the Nation into a right of Parliament, – one house of which (the Peers) is hereditary in its own right, and over which the people have no control (not so much as they have over their King); and the other elective by only a small part of the Nation. Therefore he has lessened instead of increased the rights of the people; but as they have not sense enough to see it, they have been huzzaing him. There can be no fixed principles of government, or anything like a Constitution, in a country where the Government can alter itself, or one part of it supply the other.¹

Paine's only reference to the English response to the progress of the French Revolution occurs in a letter dated 18 September 1789:

The people of this country speak very differently on the affairs of France. The mass of them, so far as I can collect, say that France is a much freer Country than England. The Peers, the Bishops, etc., say the National Assembly has gone too far. There are yet in this country, very considerable remains of the feudal System which people did not see till the revolution in France placed it before their eyes. While the multitude here could be terrified with the cry and apprehension of Arbitrary power, wooden shoes, popery and such like stuff, they thought themselves by comparison an extraordinary free people; but this bugbear now loses its force, and they appear to me to be turning their eyes towards the Aristocrats of their own Nation. This is a new mode of conquering, and I think it will have its effect.²

It did have its effect but there was no conquering. The Reform Bill of 1832 did not bring power to the common people of England. Neither, it may be said, did the French Revolution bring power, even in the short run, to the common people of France. There was, however, at least this difference: that the English aristocracy retained a large measure of power, for over another century, whereas the French aristocracy never regained it.

Jefferson remained in Paris until the late autumn of 1789, when he returned to the United States. In 1792 he was to be replaced by Gouverneur Morris, a secret enemy of Paine's, under a profession of

¹ *Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. II, pp. 233–4.

² See M. C. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, p. 267.

friendship. Paine visited the city towards the close of 1789 and was presented by the Marquis de Lafayette with the key of the Bastille, which he was requested to send to President Washington. Paine did so with an accompanying letter and the gift was gratefully acknowledged.

Meanwhile Walker Brothers had made progress with the construction of Paine's bridge. Though their product had a span of only 110 feet, a great deal short of Paine's original ambition, he was anxious to put it on show and returned to England for the purpose. By May 1790, he had found a site for it at Lisson Grove near Paddington, and exposed it to the public at a charge of a shilling a head. It proved a great attraction and remained on show for a year, in spite of the bankruptcy of Peter Whiteside. Paine repaid Whiteside's creditors the £620 which he had invested in the bridge, though since Whiteside had made the investment for his own profit, Paine might have argued that he was not strictly liable for the debt.

Paine took no further part himself in the furtherance of what he called 'pontifical invention'. In 1796, however, an iron bridge, answering to Paine's specifications, was built over the River Weir near Sunderland. It had a span of 240 feet. There is no reason to believe that Paine derived any profit from it.

The reason for Paine's detachment from his bridge was not that he had lost interest in engineering but that he had been reclaimed by politics. Whether or not the French Revolution had already propelled him in that direction, the decisive stimulus was the publication in November 1790 of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.