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To the Grand Duke Nikolay Mikhaylovich, Gaspra, 7 May 1902.

Dear Nikolay Mikhaylovich,

I received your long and interesting letter the other day. I was very pleased to get it, but certain opinions make me wish to speak my mind about the things over which I disagree with you, and which are particularly dear to me.

First of all, in calling me a great idealist on the basis of the project I am suggesting, you are essentially doing what all the Emperor's advisers who are acquainted with my thought are bound to do, i.e. regard me as a fool who doesn't understand what he's talking about. The attitude towards me of the majority of people, even those well disposed to me, reminds me of a passage from one of Dickens' novels, *Hard Times*, I think⁽¹⁾, where a clever and serious man, a mechanic, is introduced, who has made a remarkable discovery but who, precisely because he is a very remarkable inventor, is considered by his jolly, good-natured friend to be a person who understands nothing about life and who needs watching like a child in case he should do a lot of very stupid things, and whose words, if he talks about anything outside his own speciality, are received by this good-natured friend with a condescending smile at the naiveta of a person who knows nothing in life except his inventions. The funny side of the situation is that the good-natured friend didn't draw the simple inference that if the mechanic had made important discoveries, he was obviously clever. But if he was clever, it's just as obvious that he wouldn't talk about, and particularly assert, something he didn't know and hadn't thought about.

I feel all the awkwardness and immodesty of this comparison, but I can't refrain from making it, so truly does it show all the falseness of society's attitude in general to the opinions of people who are distinguished in some way from everybody else. This attitude is the more widespread because it absolves people from heeding the meaning of what such people say. 'He's a poet, a mechanic, an idealist', and so

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there's no point in trying to understand the meaning of what he says. That's the reason why such a strange opinion exists, and even the habit of appointing to posts which require the greatest gifts and intelligence all sorts of Ivanovs, Petrovs, Zengers, Pleves etc., whose only virtue is that they are no different from other people. That's the first point. The second point is that it seems to me – and I regret it very much – that you haven't read and don't know the essence of George's project. The peasant class will not only not oppose the realisation of this project, but will welcome it as the realisation of the wish of many generations of their own class.

The essence of the project surely is that land rent, i.e. the excess value of land as compared with land of the lowest yield, and depending not on man's labour but on nature or the whereabouts of the land, is used for taxes, i.e. for common needs; i.e. the common revenue is used for the common cause. The only effect of this project is that if you own a certain amount of land in Borzhomi and I in the Tula province, nobody takes that land away from me, and I am only obliged to pay a rent for it which is always lower than its yield. I don't know about Borzhomi, but in the Krapiva district of the Tula province the land-rent will be about 5 roubles, while the charge for renting the land now is about 10 roubles, and so the owner of 1,000 desyatins will be obliged to pay the treasury 5,000 roubles and if he is unable to do so, which will probably be the case with 9/10 of landowners, he will give up the land and the peasants, who now pay 10 roubles each to rent it, will obviously be glad to snatch it up for 5 roubles each and will hold it from generation to generation, so that the great mass of the peasantry cannot help but sympathise with this project and will always be in favour of it.

That, in crude outlines, is the essence of Henry George's project. That's the second point. The third point is that the fact that this measure hasn't been carried out either in Europe or America not only doesn't prove that it can't be carried out in Russia, but on the contrary points to the fact that it is only in Russia that it can be carried out, thanks to autocracy. Landowners in Europe and America who make up the greater part of the government will never in their own interests tolerate the freeing of land from the right of private ownership, but even there one can see a movement in this direction, while in Australia and New Zealand this measure is already being realised. Apart from that, this measure is particularly important in our time for the sake of a still agricultural Russia, despite the fact that Witte, Kovalevsky, Mendeleyev and others earnestly wish to direct her on to the path of

capitalism and factory production.

That's the third point. Now the fourth point. You write that 'for the realisation of this grandiose idea, a tsar-hero like Peter the Great would be needed, and different collaborators from those whom Nicholas II could have at his disposal'. But I think that no particular heroism is needed for the realisation of this idea, far less the drunken and debauched heroism of Peter the Great, but one only needs the reasonable and honest fulfilment of one's duty as a tsar, in this case most particularly profitable for the tsar himself, i.e. for autocracy, and it seems to me that Nicholas II with his kind heart, as everyone says, could fully realise it, if only he understood its full importance for himself and especially for all his people. As for collaborators, then of course the carrying out of this measure is unthinkable with those bureaucratic corpses, who are all the more corpses the higher they are up the hierarchical ladder of bureaucracy, and all that company such as the Pobedonostsevs, Vannovskys and Chertkovs will have to be removed from any part in the affair. But Russia is full of collaborators who are capable and honest and eager to do a real job which they can love. That's the fourth point.

As for what you say about the need for reforms in all branches of the administration, the pernicious nature of the bureaucracy, the universal passion for profit, all sorts of 'Panamas',⁽²⁾ excessive militarism, the dissoluteness of morals – all these things will automatically be eliminated from the government milieu as soon as unprincipled people, seeking only their own advancement and profit, are thrown out of it, and people are summoned to the great cause who will love it. And so I not only don't agree with you that the possibility of saving autocracy lies in various patching-up jobs such as the responsibility of ministers (to whom?), or the reformation and revitalising of the highest institutions like the Council of State, the ministries and so on, but, on the contrary, I think that this illusion of the possibility of putting things right by sewing new patches on old rags is the most pernicious of illusions, giving support to that impossible system of things under which we now live. Any such re-formation without the introduction of a higher idea in the name of which people can work with inspiration and self-sacrifice will only be *bonnet blanc et blanc bonnet*.⁽³⁾ Generally speaking, the realisation of my idea which seems so unrealisable to you is incomparably more possible than what they are trying to do now – support an obsolete autocracy without any higher idea, but only autocracy for the sake of autocracy.

When I speak about carrying out such a measure by means of the

force of authority, I am not speaking from my own point of view whereby I consider any force, even though it seems to us beneficial, to be contrary to the Christian teaching which I profess, but from the point of view of people wishing at all costs to defend an autocracy which is obsolete and pernicious for the autocrat as well as for the people, and to give it the best possible justification.

Forgive me for writing to you at such length about matters over which we can hardly agree, but your letter which touched on problems very dear to me and which have occupied me for a long time roused in me the need to speak my mind. Goodbye; I wish you all the best and thank you once again for carrying out my request. I am not writing to you in my own hand because I have recently had a rechute, not of pneumonia as the doctors say, but of malaria, and I am very weak again.

Yours affectionately,

Lev Tolstoy
Notes.

1. Actually in *Little Dorrit*, when the mechanical inventor Daniel Doyce is introduced by Mr Meagle with a tale of Doyce's woes at the hands of the Circumlocution Office.
2. A reference to the building of the Panama Canal and the dubious financial transactions connected with it.
3. The equivalent of 'six of one and half a dozen of the other'.