

“Internal Government”

Voltaire

1756

Voltaire was the pen name used by François-Marie Arouet, dedicated and well-known author of the Enlightenment. Here, he praises some of the governmental reforms implemented by King Louis XIV.

One owes this much justice to public men who have benefited their own age, to consider the point from which they started in order to perceive more clearly the changes they wrought in their country. Posterity owes them eternal gratitude for the examples they gave, even though such examples have been surpassed. Such lawful glory is their only reward. It is certain that the love of such glory inspired Louis XIV, at the time of his taking the government into his own hands, in his desire to improve his kingdom, beautify his court and perfect the arts.

Not only did he impose upon himself the duty of regularly transacting affairs with each of his ministers, but any well-known man could obtain a private audience with him and any citizen was free to present petitions and projects to him. The petitions were first received by a master of requests who wrote his recommendations in the margin; and they were then dispatched to the ministerial offices. Projects were examined in council if they were thought worthy of such attention, and their authors were on more than one occasion admitted to discuss their proposals with the ministers in the king's presence. There was thus a channel between the throne and the nation which existed notwithstanding the absolute power of the monarch.

The city of Paris was very far from being what it is today. The streets were unlighted, unsafe and dirty. It was necessary to find money for the constant cleaning of the streets, for lighting them every night with five thousand lamps, completely paving the whole city, building two new gates and repairing the old ones, keeping the permanent guard, both foot and mounted, to ensure the safety of the citizens. The king charged himself with everything, drawing upon funds for such necessary expenses. In 1667 he appointed a magistrate whose sole duty was to superintend the police. Most of the large cities of Europe have imitated these examples long afterwards, but none has equaled them. There is no city paved like Paris, and Rome is not even illuminated.

From 1661 the king was ceaseless in his building at the Louvre, Saint-Germain and the Versailles. Following his example private individuals erected thousands of dwellings in Paris as magnificent as they were comfortable. Their number increased to such an extent that in the environs of the Palais-Royal and St. Sulpice two new towns sprang up in Paris, both vastly superior to the old. It was about this time that those magnificent spring carriages with mirrors were invented, so that a citizen of Paris could ride through the streets of that great city in greater luxury than the first Roman triumvirs along the road to the Capitol. Inaugurated in Paris, the custom soon spread throughout the whole of Europe, and, become general, it is no longer a luxury.

The suppression of dueling was one of the greatest services rendered to the country. Formerly such duels had been sanctioned by kings, even by parliament and by the Church, and though forbidden since the days of Henry IV, the pernicious practice was more prevalent than ever. The famous combat of 1663, when eight combatants were engaged, determined Louis XIV to pardon such duels no longer. His well-timed severity gradually reformed the nation and even neighboring nations who conformed to our wise customs after having copied our bad ones.

Legislator of his people, he was no less so of his armies. It is astonishing that before his time the troops had no uniform dress. It was he who in the first year of his administration decreed that each regiment should be distinguished by the color of their uniform, or by different badges—a regulation which was soon adopted by all other nations. It was he who organized the brigadiers and gave the king's household troops the status they hold at the present day. He formed a company of musketeers and fixed the number of men for the two companies at five hundred.

It will be seen by this cursory glance what great changes Louis XIV brought about in the state; and that such changes were useful since they are still in force. His ministers vied with each other in their eagerness to assist him. The details, indeed the whole execution of such schemes was doubtless due to them, but his was the general organization. There can be no shadow of doubt that the magistrates would never have reformed the laws, the finances of the country would not have been put on a sound basis, nor discipline introduced into the army, nor a regular police force instituted throughout the kingdom; there would have been no fleets, no encouragement accorded to the arts; all these things would never have been peacefully and steadily accomplished in such a short period and under so many different ministers, had there not been a ruler to conceive of such great schemes, and with a will strong enough to carry them out.

Every king who loves glory loves the public weal; about 1698 he commanded each comptroller to present a detailed description of his province for the instruction of the Duke of Burgundy. By this means it was possible to have an exact record of the whole kingdom and a correct census of the population.

Taken from: <https://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/253/>

Source: Voltaire, *The Age of Louis XIV*, translated by W. F. Flemming, 2 vols. (London: E. R. Dumont, [1756] 1901), 2:320–33.