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Politics: Louis XV

Julian Swann

According to pope Benedict XIV there was no greater proof for the existence of providence than to see France prosper under the rule of Louis XV. Few were as gentle or ironic as the pontiff in their assessment of the king. For the duke de Choiseul, who was the linchpin of his government for more than a decade (1758–70), Louis XV was ‘soulless’ with the mind of a ‘spiteful child’. Worse still ‘he would, like Nero, have been enchanted to watch Paris burn . . . but lacked the courage to give the order.’¹ In the popular memory, the king is famous for uttering the phrase ‘after me the deluge’, which, while almost certainly apocryphal, conjures up an image of a monarch intelligent enough to foresee the tragedy of 1789, but too lazy to do anything about it. Napoleon, on the other hand, once declared that he ‘found the crown of France in the mud’ and many have assumed that it was Louis XV who let it drop. Mme de Pompadour was only the most important of a string of mistresses, many of whom were little more than girls housed in the *Parc aux cerfs* (‘deer park’) in circumstances reminiscent of a brothel. Finally in 1769, the ageing monarch scandalized his subjects by falling for the charms of Mme du Barry, a courtesan of ill-repute, who was installed in Versailles as his official companion. With such a record, Louis XV has, not surprisingly, been represented as the embodiment of vice, the very incarnation of the abuses allegedly rotting the core of the old regime. It may therefore come as a surprise to learn of the existence of another very different interpretation of his reign. There is a venerable school of historical scholarship which maintains that in his later years the king threw off his lethargy, sponsoring reforms capable of saving the monarchy had

¹ J. P. Guicciardini and P. Bonnet (eds.) *Mémoires du Duc de Choiseul* (Paris, 1983), 192.

not a premature death cut short the experiment. That the historical reputation of Louis XV remains so contentious says much about both the troubled personality of the king and the long-term significance of his reign.

The regency, 1715–1723

Popular rejoicing greeted the news of the sun king's passing, but for a perceptive observer any sense of relief was liable to be tinged with apprehension. His successor was a child of 5 and previous royal minorities had been blighted by civil war. With the government close to bankruptcy, it would require a regent endowed with ability and luck to avoid a repetition. As the king was an orphan, it was the senior prince of the blood, his uncle Philippe duke d'Orléans, who would act as regent. Affable, intelligent, and a talented general, the regent was also a libertine and a rake who had fallen foul of the starchy atmosphere of Versailles during Louis XIV's twilight years. His unorthodox lifestyle even gave birth to vicious rumours accusing him of poisoning his relatives when tragedy struck the royal family in 1711–12. The old king treated these slurs with the contempt they deserved, but he never accorded Orléans his total confidence. Just prior to his death, Louis XIV drew up a secret will limiting the power of Orléans as regent while promoting that of his bastard sons, the duke du Maine and the count de Toulouse. His actions have been interpreted as a sop to Mme de Maintenon, permissible on the grounds that the wishes of a dead monarch were not binding on his successors. It is true that a similar testament written by Louis XIII had been ignored, but there was no guarantee that history would repeat itself.

In defusing the crisis, Orléans displayed his political flair. Hours after the king's death, he announced that a bed of justice would be held the next day, 2 September 1715, for the formal declaration of the regency. Rather than take chances, Orléans struck a deal with leading parlementaires by promising to restore their right of remonstrance before the registration of laws in return for annulling the will. When combined with the conspicuous deployment of troops and liberal dispensation of patronage to the other princes and Court grandees it

was enough to ensure victory. The parlement of Paris, with the princes and the peers assembled, overturned Louis XIV's testament, recognizing instead the right of Orléans to the full title and powers of regent. Many years later a frustrated Louis XV bitterly reproached the regent's grandson, blaming Orléans for his difficulties with the parlements. It was an unjust reprimand. In 1715, after more than twenty sombre years of war, France was seething with discontent. The decision to undo Louis XIV's legislation of 1673 restricting the right of remonstrance was sensible and perceptive. It opened an important safety valve and won Orléans vital allies at a crucial moment.

The regent was equally dextrous in his handling of the *grandees*. The aristocratic thinkers of the Burgundy circle had been critical of Louis XIV's 'ministerial despotism' and in addition to their hopes of restoring the old nobility to political power had been discussing the summoning of an estates general. Orléans defused the threat with aplomb. He informed the *grandees* of their appointment to key positions on a series of seven new councils that became collectively known as the *polysynodie*. The councils, which included foreign affairs, finance, and the navy were not executive organs. They merely acted as discussion chambers, preparing reports and recommendations for the regency council where real power lay. Not surprisingly, initial enthusiasm soon waned and in 1718 they were abolished without dissent. Yet *polysynodie* had more than served its purpose by bringing potentially disruptive groups into government while the regent consolidated his grip on power.

An ability to balance the competing interests of the court factions was one of the regent's most telling assets, and he succeeded in persuading the powerful that cooperation with his government was more lucrative than opposition. The truth of this maxim was demonstrated by the treatment of the defeated bastards. In July 1717, the regent overturned Louis XIV's edict placing them in succession to the throne. A year later they were stripped of their 'royal' status and demoted to the level of peers. Orléans was generous in victory and Toulouse remained a trusted adviser on naval matters. Maine, on the other hand, was drawn into plotting against the regent with the Spanish ambassador, Cellamare. When the conspiracy was discovered, Maine, together with his equally compromised wife, was imprisoned in the Bastille.

As the struggle with the bastards demonstrated, the French succession had been in the balance since 1712 and Orléans had to tread carefully. If Louis XV succumbed to one of the all too prevalent childhood illnesses Europe faced a grave international crisis. According to the Salic law—one of the fabled fundamental laws of the kingdom—the crown passed to Philip V of Spain. The fear of a king reigning in both Madrid and Versailles had made his renunciation of the French throne one of the principal clauses of the peace of Utrecht. If the treaty was upheld, the crown passed to Orléans, an outcome with obvious attractions to the British and Dutch governments. Some historians have therefore been critical of the regent's foreign policy because of its emphasis upon an entente with the maritime powers consummated by the signing of the Triple alliance in 1717. The target of the new allies was Philip V who had launched a crusade to recapture Spanish possessions in Italy lost at Utrecht. Nothing revealed the new diplomatic order better than the sight of French troops marching into Spain in order to check him.

Yet the regent's diplomacy was not part of a cunning plan to advance the interests of the House of Orléans. France needed peace, not a quixotic expression of Bourbon family solidarity that would have almost certainly resulted in war with Austria and the maritime powers. Had Louis XV died then even the closest admirers of the regent realized that Philip V would be king. The most Orléans could hope for was to replace him in Madrid. The support of the maritime powers would be a huge advantage in these circumstances as all sides realized. However, if the regent occasionally dreamed of life in the Escorial, there is no evidence that he allowed his personal interests to conflict with those of Louis XV.

With peace abroad, Orléans was free to concentrate upon internal problems. The most pressing was a truly astronomical state debt of some 2,000 million *livres*. Following the precedent set by Colbert and Louis XIV, he established a chamber of justice in 1716 to investigate the excess profits allegedly extorted by the financiers during the wars. The substantial sum of 220 million *livres* was raised, but it was still only a drop in the ocean of state debt. The chamber did, however, please the magistrates who served on it and the public who saw these despised 'fat cats' get their just deserts. Although welcome, something more substantial than a public relations triumph was required, especially after the tenth tax lapsed in 1717. It was in these circumstances

that the regent displayed the unconventional side to his character by placing his confidence in the Scottish adventurer, John Law.

In a meteoric career, Law rose from obscurity to a brief and eventful dominance of the kingdom's financial affairs. With official encouragement, he established a private bank in 1716 and began to issue bank notes. These were subsequently accepted as legal tender, and the phenomenal success of the enterprise persuaded the regent to accept its conversion into a state bank in December 1718. With external peace and strong demographic and economic growth, the moment was propitious for such an experiment. As the paper currency began to circulate it gave an inflationary boost to the economy and, as Law intended, interest rates fell. He then turned his attention to the second major plank of his scheme, the creation of a monopoly trading company—the Mississippi company—financed by his bank. An already grandiose project was rendered even more imposing by the acquisition of the rights of the general farm and the tobacco monopoly. To crown the edifice, the bank also took over responsibility for state debt.

Law was clearly seeking to emulate the banking and commercial ventures of the English and the Dutch. Unfortunately for France, his scheme was overambitious and his economic analysis riddled with flaws. Convinced of the benefits to be gained from the increased circulation of money, he printed ever larger numbers of bank notes, quickly outstripping the productive capacity of the economy. Nor was he helped by the regent's proclivity for scattering the company's shares like confetti as part of his constant battle to keep the Court grandees on his side. A speculative frenzy, soon followed by rampant inflation was the predictable result with company shares reaching dizzy heights on unsubstantiated rumours that the Mississippi delta would be Louis XV's El Dorado.

Here alone were enough reasons for the project to falter and there were plenty of political obstacles to add to the equation. By promoting Law, the regent alienated the Court bankers and farmers-general as well as the head of the council of finance, the influential duke de Noailles. The parlement also raised its voice against Law's untested schemes and was exiled to Pontoise for its pains. Yet despite desperate efforts to shore up the bank's credit, the speculative bubble burst in May 1720. For those perceptive enough to convert their paper into more tangible assets before the crash, the scheme brought fabulous

profits. Similarly those individuals or institutions that had been able to repay debt with inflated notes had reason to thank Law. The state itself had prospered in this fashion, reducing its debt substantially in the process. Of course, for every beneficiary of Law's system there were countless victims left holding a currency not worth the paper it was printed on. As a result, he has been blamed for the monarchy's subsequent inability to establish a state bank. In reality, the problem was more profound. Years of broken promises and fiscal expediency had created a perfectly legitimate suspicion of the crown's fiscal operations. Without public accountability, hopes of transplanting English or Dutch banking practice to French soil were doomed to failure. Once Law was exiled, French financial administration continued as before.

Religious divisions posed a no less perplexing problem for the regent. The bull *Unigenitus* condemning Jansenism was a poisonous gift from Louis XIV that had damaging repercussions throughout the reign of his successor. A religious sceptic, and by nature a conciliator, Orléans sought a compromise. Influential opponents of the bull, such as the archbishop of Paris, cardinal de Noailles, and the *parlementaire* priest Pucelle, were invited to sit on the council of conscience. Meanwhile pope Clement XI was approached in an ultimately vain attempt to persuade him to clarify disputed aspects of *Unigenitus*. What undermined the pursuit of peace in the church was the depth of religious feeling on both sides. In April 1717, over 3,000 clerics, including Noailles, and a majority of the theological faculty of the Sorbonne, appealed against *Unigenitus* to a general council of the church. Nothing was more certain to light the blue touch paper in Rome, and in September 1718 an outraged pope unleashed a rocket in the form of the encyclical, *Pastoralis Officii*, which excommunicated the appellants. He found staunch supporters in the French church, known as the *constitutionnaires*, who called for unequivocal acceptance of the 'constitution', as the bull was known. In sermons, pastoral letters, and polemical pamphlets the theological storm raged and with his policy of conciliation in tatters, the regent changed tack. In August 1720, he issued a declaration imposing silence on all disputes arising from *Unigenitus* and acted firmly against those who disobeyed. It was not a permanent solution, but the regent was spared further frustration by his premature death in December 1723. He had finally paid the price for a life of epic overindulgence. Yet Orléans

deserves to be remembered as something more than a rake. Thanks to his equanimity and good sense, he had given France the most trouble-free regency in its history.

The 'golden age' of Fleury

Although Louis XV was crowned at Reims in October 1722, he was only just entering his teens and with the regent's death power passed to the duke de Bourbon. His brief ministry is primarily remembered for his decision to marry the king to Maria Leszczynska, daughter of the dethroned king of Poland, and it ended abruptly in December 1725 with the duke's exile to his chateau at Chantilly. His disgrace was the first independent act of the young king, who replaced him with his tutor, cardinal André-Hercule de Fleury. Orphaned at the age of 2, king of France and focus of the attendant regal and courtly paraphernalia at 5, Louis XV suffered a traumatic childhood that left him inclined to shyness, fatalism, and melancholy. The grandfatherly Fleury, already a venerable 73 in 1726, was an indispensable source of emotional support for his royal charge and Bourbon had made the mistake of trying to separate them. He was not alone in underestimating Fleury, who was commonly believed to be too old or unambitious to turn his hold over the king to advantage. It was a grave mistake because once in power he was almost impossible to dislodge. Acting as first minister, the cardinal directed the affairs of France for the next seventeen years. He had the complete confidence of Louis XV, and he kept a sharp eye on the activities of the secretaries of state by sitting in on their meetings with the king. Any minister unfortunate or foolhardy enough to cross Fleury risked dismissal, as the talented Chauvelin discovered to his cost in 1737.

In his approach to international politics, Fleury was generally pacific. Like the regent, he viewed the English alliance as the basis for European stability. Although the alliance between the two powers lapsed after 1731, they were able to maintain a mutually beneficial *détente*. France was thus free from the threat of hostile European coalitions that had brought her so close to defeat between 1689 and 1713. When war did break out over the disputed Polish succession in 1733, Fleury was able to draw maximum advantage.

The death of Augustus II provided the opportunity for the deposed Stanislas Leszczyński, now the father-in-law of Louis XV, to reclaim the throne. Poland formed part of France's traditional stable of secondary powers subsidized in order to threaten the flanks of Austria. If Stanislas could be re-established in Warsaw, it would be a major diplomatic coup, and would silence slanderous tongues who mocked the marriage of Louis XV and a minor Polish princess. What prevented this happy outcome was the intervention of Russia. Since Peter I's victory in the Great Northern War, Poland had been reduced to the level of a Russian protectorate. Empress Anna had no desire to see that position reversed, and she backed the rival candidacy of Augustus III of Saxony. With Russian aid, he soon worsted Stanislas, who took refuge in the port of Danzig. Fleury, who was astute enough to realize the futility of waging war in such circumstances, did no more than send a token force in an abortive attempt to relieve him. Instead, the war was fought against Russia's ally, Austria, in the traditional theatres of Germany and Italy. Helped by a renewed alliance with Spain, France won a series of rapid victories, forcing the emperor Charles VI to sue for peace. The defeated Stanislas was compensated with the duchy of Lorraine. It was a triumph for Fleury. An intendant arrived to administer the duchy, which became officially part of France on the death of Stanislas in 1766. There were other gains for the Bourbons in Italy, and the only cost to France was recognition of the pragmatic sanction, naming Maria Theresa, daughter of Charles VI, as sole heir to the Habsburg hereditary lands.

One short, successful war was the only interruption in an otherwise peaceful generation. Without needing to implement drastic reforms, the government was able to repair much of the damage inflicted by Louis XIV. The controllers-general, Dodun (1722–6) and, especially, Orry (1730–45), restored balance to government finances that were showing a modest annual surplus by the late 1730s. No less impressive was the stabilization of the French currency, the *livre tournois*, which after 1726 was no longer subject to manipulation by the crown. The development of a modern road network, which was one of the great ornaments of the age of Louis XV, also gathered pace under Fleury. Thanks to the painstaking efforts of chancellor d'Aguesseau, progress was made in judicial reform, primarily by ironing out inconsistencies in civil law. These were worthy achievements, but it has to be said that the cardinal's administration was profoundly

conservative. With France still basking in her reputation as the continent's foremost military power a certain complacency was understandable, and while the ministry tinkered with the edges of the existing system, it never contemplated radical change.

Fleury's rule was therefore a period of relative calm. What stopped it from becoming soporific was the continuing furore surrounding *Unigenitus*. The regent's efforts to impose silence on clerical bickering had failed and the row continued with a powerful and influential group of bishops claiming that complete submission to the 'constitution' was essential for salvation. A small, but no less fervent number believed the very opposite and they were backed by a more substantial body of opinion in the parish clergy. An unshakeable faith in the righteousness of their cause was the inspiration for Jansenists throughout the eighteenth century. As a minority within the church, they might have been nothing more than a nuisance were it not for the fact that the opposition to *Unigenitus* was fed from other streams.

Most significantly, the bull offended those in the church and especially the parlements who were loyal to the Gallican tradition. The four articles promulgated by Louis XIV in 1682 had given legal expression to the widely held belief that the French church had rights and liberties independent of Rome. *Unigenitus*, with its clumsy phraseology, most strikingly in the notorious article 91 in which the pope reserved the theoretical right to excommunicate the king, challenged those principles and only Louis XIV's threats and coercion had persuaded the magistrates to register the bull. After his death, they were much less malleable and any alteration to its status risked provoking opposition.

Fleury had personally accepted *Unigenitus* without demur. He was not, however, a religious bigot. Like many others, he believed Jansenism to be a danger to church unity and acted accordingly. His strategy was to starve the movement of leadership, much as Louis XIII and Louis XIV had done with the Huguenots. Constant pressure was exerted upon leading appellants, notably cardinal de Noailles, with the aim of persuading them to accept the bull. Noailles spent more than a decade grappling with his conscience before finally capitulating in 1728. Other outspoken critics of *Unigenitus* were exiled to distant seminaries and, in the case of Soanen, bishop of Senes, deposed. Thereafter Fleury used his control of ecclesiastical preferences to ensure that only those of orthodox, preferably moderate

opinions were promoted. Finally, he sought, not altogether successfully, to suppress the publication of sermons and theological tracts that had done so much to fan the flames of controversy.

As these measures began to bite, the cardinal felt confident in his ability to end further quibbling by issuing a declaration, in March 1730, making *Unigenitus* a law of church and state. Opposition within the parlement of Paris was fierce. The Jansenists, led by Pucelle, played on the Gallican and legal sensibilities of their colleagues to such good effect that the government was obliged to hold a bed of justice. It was a pyrrhic victory for the crown. An angry parlement, frightened that Fleury intended to remove its traditional right to hear appeals against convictions in the ecclesiastical courts, waged a bitter war against the bull's partisans in the episcopate. After two years of strife, Fleury struck out in August 1732, issuing a law restricting the parlement's right of remonstrance. The regent had employed a similar tactic in 1718, threatening the magistrates with a return to the draconian era of Louis XIV. Such a danger concentrated minds wonderfully, and in 1732, as in 1718, a compromise was reached that involved the suspension of the law. It was, however, a stark warning of the havoc religious controversy could wreak on the delicate relationship between the crown and the parlement.

Thereafter calm was gradually restored. Fleury stuck fast to his policy of isolating the Jansenists and tried to avoid trouble in the parlement by evoking contentious cases to the royal council. He was helped by a radical offshoot of Jansenism, the convulsionary movement, which flowered in Paris after 1727. It emerged as the cult of a pious deacon, François de Paris, whose tomb in the cemetery of Saint Médard became the setting for miracle cures and bizarre worship, featuring speaking in tongues and all manner of writhing and contortions. Hundreds of pilgrims flocked to the scene either to marvel or mock at these wondrous sights. Neither Fleury nor the ecclesiastical authorities had need of a Jansenist saint and they closed the cemetery. The parlement of Paris did contain a handful of disciples of Saint Médard, but the overwhelming majority was shocked and embarrassed by the convulsionaries. This undoubtedly contributed to the less combative stance of the magistrates after 1732, and when Fleury died in 1743 there were good grounds for believing that the worst of the religious crisis had passed.

Louis le bien-aimé

To the dismay of the ambitious, Fleury's vigorous constitution enabled him to govern until he was well into his eighties. He carefully chaperoned the king, controlling access to his person and appointing a ministry loyal to himself. Aware that there was little chance of unseating the cardinal, the court cabals were rendered relatively powerless. Only towards the end of his life did he begin to lose his grip. When Charles VI died in 1740, Fleury was personally inclined to honour the pragmatic sanction. His hopes of peace were dashed by the opportunistic Frederick II of Prussia, who brazenly seized the Austrian province of Silesia. With the Habsburg empire seemingly on the brink of partition, Fleury was unable to restrain the war party at Court, headed by the charismatic count de Belle-Isle, grandson of Louis XIV's disgraced minister, Fouquet. As French armies marched into Germany, they brought a quickening of the diplomatic and political tempo that symbolized the transition from the more leisurely pace of life under the cardinal. He died on 29 January 1743; France would learn to mourn his passing.

With his mentor gone, Louis XV was finally, at the age of 32, obliged to quit the shadows and assume his *métier* of king. His first, and in some ways most important, decision was whether or not to replace Fleury. He chose not to do so, and instead, following the precedent of 1661, announced that he would rule as his own first minister. Unfortunately, unlike Louis XIV or Frederick II, Louis XV was not a young man impatient to exercise power. The king was intelligent and punctilious in his performance of his official duties and had a regal bearing that commanded immediate respect. He was not, however, a natural ruler. Instead he jealously guarded his own authority without bringing vision to government. Unwilling to trust his own ministers, he spent most of his personal reign directing a 'secret' foreign policy at odds with official diplomacy. By turns fatalistic or authoritarian, he could strike out boldly one day, only to retreat in the face of opposition the next. No policy or minister could ever be considered secure and both the Court and the royal council were beset by intrigue. Senior ministers such as Machault d'Arnouville, d'Argenson, and Choiseul, to name but a few, were

disgraced and there were ten finance ministers between 1750 and 1774. Perhaps the only point of stability was provided by the presence of Mme de Pompadour. Between 1745 and her death in 1764, this cultured and resilient woman was inseparable from the king. She dominated the distribution of court patronage and her political influence increased as the years progressed. Yet even Pompadour was only one powerful figure among many seeking to monopolize the confidence of the king. In such circumstances, stable government proved elusive and it is not surprising that perceptive observers dreamed of a return to the golden age of Fleury.

In the early years of his personal reign, Louis XV was shielded from the pitfalls of Versailles by the impact of war. Despite the perfidy of Frederick II and the attacks of the French and their allies, Maria Theresa refused to play the role of sacrificial lamb. Displaying great courage, she rallied her subjects, driving an audacious French force led by Belle-Isle from Prague in 1742. He saved his army with a brilliant tactical retreat, but his hopes of delivering a mortal blow to Habsburg power were dashed. Yet despite Britain entering the conflict on the side of Maria Theresa, the War of the Austrian Succession would bring glory to French arms and to Louis XV. Under the command of marshal de Saxe, the French won a series of battles in the Low Countries. Brussels was taken in 1746 and Saxe was soon threatening the Dutch republic. Alarm bells rang in London as well as in Amsterdam, bringing their governments scurrying to the peace table at Aix-la-Chapelle.

Louis XV shared in the triumphs of his great general. The king's first campaign was uneventful; his second, in 1744, almost ended in catastrophe. As he advanced eastwards to join his armies, he was stricken by a sudden and terrifying illness. For several days he lay on what all feared would be his deathbed at Metz. The panic that gripped France was only outweighed by the joy and relief that swept the kingdom when news of the king's recovery was made public. On a tide of euphoria, his subjects thanked God for saving their king who was now popularly acclaimed 'Louis the well-beloved' (*bien-aimé*).

A year later, the king was crowned with the laurels of victory at Fontenoy. There Saxe achieved perhaps his greatest triumph defeating the British after a bloody and close run encounter. Despite coming under enemy fire, the king refused to leave the field and Voltaire and countless lesser bards sang the praises of the warrior king, who, as he

surveyed the human carnage of Fontenoy, exclaimed: 'see what such a victory costs, the blood of our enemies is always the blood of men, the true glory is to spare it.'

These pacific sentiments were genuinely held and they counter the claims of critics like Choiseul that the king was heartless or cruel. When peace was signed at Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748, Louis XV was generous to the point of recklessness. To the amazement of Europe, he handed back his conquests in the Low Countries in return for French possessions lost to the British in North America. Gains in Nice and Savoy were also relinquished, and, to add insult to injury, he agreed to expel the immensely popular young pretender to the British throne, 'bonnie prince Charlie', from France. His moderation contrasts sharply with the arrogance of Louis XIV and guaranteed that there would be no repetition of the great coalitions against France of 1688 to 1713. Yet to patriotic French opinion, it seemed as if blood and money had been sacrificed in vain. Nothing better captures the public mood of anger and resentment than police reports of children taunting each other with the rhyme 'you're as stupid as the peace'.

The mid-century crisis

Historians are forever on the lookout for turning points and watersheds. If any year in the reign of Louis XV deserves such a label it is 1748. A successful war had deflected attention from his conduct of government and that was about to change. Within only a few years, the king was being compared to the ineffectual Henri III, and his government ridiculed for its incompetence and factionalism.

The first sign of trouble to come was provided by the attempted reforms of the finance minister, Machault. In 1749 he decided to replace the wartime tenth with a new tax, the twentieth. It was a bold innovation, proposing not only to levy a new direct tax in peacetime, but also to include the hitherto exempt French church and relatively undertaxed nobility and *pays d'états*. Fully implemented, the twentieth would mark a crucial step towards fiscal equality. Initially the omens were good. After making remonstrances the parlement of Paris registered the law without difficulty. The other parlements and

the provincial estates also yielded, leaving the church alone in its opposition to Machault.

With the lines between church and state so firmly drawn, Louis XV and his minister were in a potentially powerful position. A successful raid on the coffers of the church would have undoubtedly sweetened the otherwise bitter pill of new taxation for the population at large. The campaign to tax the clergy also attracted a broad coalition stretching from Voltaire and the anti-clerical *philosophes*, to those Gallicans and Jansenists in the parlement of Paris who were keen to curtail the privileges of the clergy. If the king had stood firm, it is nearly certain that ecclesiastical resistance would have been overcome and that his name would have joined the others in the pantheon of enlightened absolutists. Instead, Louis XV grappled with his usually elastic conscience before caving in to the remonstrances of the bishops and the devout party at court. The church thus preserved its fiscal privileges and a golden opportunity was lost.

Had Louis XV's capitulation to the clergy over the twentieth been part of a broader strategy to preserve peace in the church it might have been comprehensible. Alas, the bishops who were so forceful in opposing Machault were simultaneously stirring the pot of religious controversy. The chief troublemaker was the new archbishop of Paris, Christophe de Beaumont, an implacable opponent of Jansenism devoid of any sense but that of his own righteousness. His appointment to such a critical see would have been unthinkable under Fleury, and it was an early signal that the cardinal's adroit handling of religious affairs would not be matched by his successors. Together with other zealots, Beaumont began systematically to deprive the Jansenists of the sacraments on the controversial basis that submission to *Unigenitus* was a 'rule of faith'. His favoured tool was the confession note, a certificate confirming that a penitent had been confessed by an authorized priest. Failure to produce a note was tantamount to admitting opposition to *Unigenitus* and resulted in a denial of the last rites.

Words scarcely suffice to describe the horror of such a punishment for a devout catholic as it carried the risk of eternal damnation. Even condemned criminals were not denied the consolation of the sacraments, and the public was stunned to see elderly religious, many of whom were distinguished by their piety and good works, treated so harshly. An estimated 10,000 mourners attended the funeral of one

victim, and public anger led the diarist Barbier to declare ‘the majority of Paris . . . is Jansenist’.² Against all good sense, Beaumont had succeeded in reviving religious controversy and there was no Fleury to douse the flames. With his Court and council divided, Louis XV failed to provide the necessary leadership and even today it is impossible to be sure about his own view of Beaumont’s actions. Nor was there anyone in the ministry to speak in his name. The result was drift and procrastination interspersed with fruitless efforts to negotiate a compromise.

As this new wave of persecution broke, the Jansenists turned once more to the parlement for assistance. The magistrates were initially reluctant to become embroiled in the dispute. It was the failure of the crown to act that created a mood of frustration and ultimately anger. Moderate voices fell silent and the vacuum was filled by a small but highly effective Jansenist party. There were no more than twenty Jansenists in the parlement, but they included talented and hard-working young magistrates such as Chauvelin, Lambert and L’Averdy. They denounced cases of refused sacraments and urged the parlement to use its right to hear appeals against the decisions of the ecclesiastical courts. Between March 1752 and May 1753 alone twenty-two such cases from six different dioceses were investigated, and relations between the parlement and the episcopate became ever more strained. With both sides determined to uphold their corporate dignity, it proved impossible to isolate either Beaumont or his Jansenist opponents.

Within less than a decade of Fleury’s death, the fragile peace in the church had been shattered. When confronted by the sacraments crisis, Louis XV had tried desperately to avoid treading on clerical toes and had pursued the will-o’-the-wisp of a ‘third way’ that could unite moderates against the fanatics on both sides. As failure brought frustration, the king questioned the loyalty of those he termed ‘the republicans’ in the parlement. The crisis came to a head in May 1753 when he refused to receive the so-called ‘grand remonstrances’ that combined a denunciation of the refusal of the sacraments with a forceful reassertion of the parlement’s role as guardian of the fundamental laws. In response, the magistrates went on strike before being exiled by their angry monarch.

² E. J. F. Barbier, *Chronique de la régence et du règne de Louis XV, 1718–1763* (8 vols., Paris, 1857–8), v. 226.

Unfortunately for Louis XV, the parlement was exiled without anyone giving serious consideration to what might be put in its place, causing grumbling from Parisians about a government incapable of providing either 'bread or justice'. No less damaging was the effect on the provincial parlements which began to agitate on behalf of the exiles. Finally, the judges themselves, especially the Jansenists, spent their enforced leisure time studying French history and refining their constitutional arguments. They were ably assisted by the lawyers, most notably Le Paige, who published the highly influential *Lettres historiques* during the crisis. Revising arguments last seen during the Fronde and the religious wars of the sixteenth century, he argued that the parlement was the direct descendant of the national assemblies held by the Frankish kings. His work also contained the seeds of what, after 1755, became known as the 'union of classes', the theory that together the parlements formed the one and indivisible parlement of France. These ideas had their roots in some of the most troubled years in French history and their re-emergence during the peaceful reign of an adult king underlines the damage caused by *Unigenitus*.

Exiling the parlement of Paris was therefore counter-productive. Negotiations for a recall began almost immediately, but, with both sides convinced that they were the injured party, more than a year elapsed before the magistrates were recalled. For once, Louis XV took the initiative, revealing his sadly under-utilized talent for government by personally drafting a new law of silence. Registered by the parlement in September 1754, it invited the magistrates to prevent disturbance of the religious peace which they took to mean the refusal of the sacraments. Louis XV demonstrated his new-found determination by exiling Beaumont, while simultaneously petitioning Benedict XIV for an encyclical clarifying the status of *Unigenitus*.

It might therefore be assumed that the law of silence marked a turning point in Louis XV's treatment of the parlement. Unfortunately his policy had all the consistency of blancmange. In October 1755, the king backed a half-baked scheme of chancellor Lamoignon and the minister of war, count d'Argenson, to bolster the powers of the grand council. It was a deliberate challenge to the authority of the parlement which responded in November 1755 with some of the boldest remonstrances ever written. Explicitly using the language of the union of classes, the Parisian magistrates not only rallied the provincial parlements, but even dared to invite the princes

and the peers to join them in the defence of the fundamental laws. The affair was typical of government under Louis XV. Without planning or foresight, the government had picked an unnecessary fight with the parlement which then defended itself with forceful constitutional arguments. The government backed down in April 1756, but the king soon paid the price for his error. War was declared against Great Britain in June, and when called upon to register a second twentieth to pay for the conflict the parlement resisted tenaciously. A bed of justice was needed to impose the law, and ominously for the king the provincial parlements picked up the gauntlet, more than matching the resistance of the Parisians.

To make matters worse, the hardline bishops had continued to order refusals of the sacraments despite having been exiled by the king. Louis XV pinned his hopes on the pope, whose encyclical, *Ex Omnibus*, appeared in the autumn of 1756. A moderate document, it restricted the refusal of the sacraments to notorious sinners. It is easy to imagine the anger of the king when a Jansenist magistrate persuaded the parlement that the encyclical should be lacerated and burnt by the public executioner. Such an extreme response was a clear indication that the senior magistrates had lost control. Indeed they probably encouraged the king to resort to harsh measures. On 10 December 1756 a law based on the encyclical together with a disciplinary edict was imposed at a bed of justice. That night the overwhelming majority of the magistrates resigned. Needless to say, the government had no contingency plan to fall back on. Instead it dug itself into a deeper hole by exiling sixteen supposed ringleaders of the opposition in January 1757. It was all to no avail. At war and in dire need of the parlement to bolster credit, the king reversed his policy in September of that year. Cases of refused sacraments continued until the end of the reign, but the parlement was in future allowed to pursue those responsible. The magistrates had triumphed and the heat generated by the *Unigenitus* controversy finally began to cool.

A decade of conflict had taken the shine off public perceptions of Louis XV. Ministers and policies came and went with alarming regularity and they inspired neither confidence nor respect from the kingdom's elites. No less disturbing was the loss of public esteem for the king, who became the butt of popular insults, placards, and graffiti—some of it regicidal in tone. Yet despite the disenchantment, France was still not prepared for the shock of 5 January 1757. Amidst

the turmoil of the political crisis provoked by the bed of justice of the previous December, Damiens, a deranged domestic servant, tried to assassinate the king. Louis XV only received a minor wound and his life was never in danger. It was, nevertheless, a rude awakening for the kingdom, conjuring up folk memories of civil war and briefly fanning the embers of affection for Louis the well-beloved. The king himself was plunged into melancholy, lying listlessly in his bed even when encouraged to leave it by his surgeons. When told that his wound was not serious he replied, 'it is more than you think, because it goes to the heart'.³

The diplomatic revolution

The peace of Aix-la-Chapelle failed to resolve the underlying causes of conflict between France and Great Britain in North America. To protect their thinly populated possessions, the French authorities began to construct a line of fortifications connected by regular patrols. Skirmishes between rival forces were an almost inevitable result, most famously in 1754 when a group of colonists led by George Washington killed an unarmed French officer as he approached to negotiate. Louis XV genuinely wished to avoid war. All the pacific sentiments in the world were not, however, going to halt the British. They sent an army under general Braddock to attack the French forts in 1755, and ordered their navy to block French reinforcements reaching Canada. The belligerent intentions of perfidious Albion were illustrated by the affair of the *Alcide* and the *Lys*. The two French warships were seized after coming under fire within seconds of being informed by British officers that the two nations were at peace! Satisfaction was, however, obtained against Braddock. In a perfectly executed ambush, French troops destroyed the enemy army, slaying the British general in the process.

It was not until June 1756 that Louis XV officially declared war on Britain. Responsibility for the conflict lay in London, but with Europe at peace there was every reason to believe that France could hold her

³ L. Dussieux and E. Soulié (eds.), *Mémoires du duc de Luyne sur la cour de Louis XV, 1735–1758* (17 vols., Paris, 1860–5), xvi. 282.

own overseas. Confirmation of the theory was apparently provided by marshal de Richelieu's brilliant victory at Mahon, which saw the capture of strategically important Menorca. The British admiral Byng, who failed to relieve his compatriots, was court martialled and shot, as Voltaire cuttingly observed, 'to encourage the others'. Hopes were high that the British government would suffer a similar fate. It was not to be. Instead a war that had begun so promisingly would finish in defeat, thanks, in large measure, to the diplomatic revolution.

If the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle resembled no more than a truce in North America, much the same could be said of its effects in central Europe. Maria Theresa was determined to recapture Silesia and together with her chancellor, Kaunitz, had conceived a daring strategy. They proposed nothing less than a complete realignment of the diplomatic constellation by allying with France against Prussia. The not unreasonable assumption behind their thinking was that the two great continental powers would easily crush the upstart Frederick II. What persuaded Louis XV to accept the Austrian embrace was the duplicity of the Prussian king, who, without warning, abandoned his former ally by signing the treaty of Westminster with Britain in January 1756. Understandably piqued, Louis XV agreed to a defensive alliance with Vienna in May. The French public was astounded. Few could understand why the king had allied himself to the Habsburgs, the sworn enemies of France since the time of cardinal de Richelieu.

Yet with war against Britain certain, Louis XV clearly believed that the alliance would guarantee peace in Europe. Who would dare to attack such a militarily formidable coalition? The king's error was to overlook the intensity of Austrian ambitions to reclaim Silesia. Kaunitz wanted war, and was busily seeking to add Russia to a grand alliance against Frederick II. The Prussian king was not easily duped, and, disastrously for Louis XV, he decided that attack was the best form of defence. His forces marched into Saxony in August 1756, unleashing the Seven Years War in the process. Within just four months of signing a treaty that he believed would preserve peace, Louis XV faced the nightmare of fighting a world war on two fronts, obliged to pay for the naval and colonial conflict against Britain, while simultaneously sending armies and subsidies into Germany.

The Seven Years War

Initially the war went well for France, and Richelieu followed up his triumph in Menorca by defeating the British in Hanover. With the great Saxe dead, successful generals were at a premium, but Richelieu soon fell foul of Court intrigue and was relieved of his command. His fate was typical of French military appointments during the war, which depended on connections at Versailles rather than experience in the field. Never was the truth of this maxim revealed more clearly than on 5 November 1757. A French army, commanded by the prince de Soubise, a particularly close crony of the king and Mme de Pompadour, was routed by Frederick II's much smaller force at Rosbach. French armies had been defeated many times before, but Rosbach was different. With nearly 10,000 killed, wounded, or taken prisoner, as against only 500 official Prussian casualties, it was humiliation on a grand scale. For the first time since 1643, when the Great Condé broke the Spanish veterans at Rocroi, France was no longer the continent's foremost military power.

Nor would the shame of Rosbach be easily avenged. The demoralized French suffered further defeats at Krefeld (1758) and Minden (1759) and were a pale shadow of the force led so gallantly by Saxe. Frederick II, on the other hand, withstood the onslaught of France's allies, Austria and Russia, displaying a combination of military genius and luck which earned him the title 'great'. When peace was signed in Germany in 1763, Silesia was definitively his. Tellingly, Frederick II was a hero in France!

Praise of the Prussian king was a thinly disguised rebuke for Louis XV, who made no repeat of his campaigns of the 1740s. His only sorties were into the forests of Versailles where, his critics alleged, 'he made war on stags'. To the pain of defeat, Louis XV added the shame of dishonour. With the connivance of Mme de Pompadour, the king spent even more time in the company of a string of young mistresses housed in the *parc aux cerfs*. It was conduct becoming of an aristocratic rake, not 'his most Christian majesty', and, in official pronouncements, the proud title of well-beloved rang increasingly hollow.

Defeat in Germany was accompanied by spectacular losses overseas.

Once the British had recovered from their early setbacks, they were able to capitalize upon their naval superiority and France's distractions in Europe. The French coast was blockaded and in the major sea battles of Lagos and Quiberon (1759) Louis XV's fleet was destroyed. Starved of reinforcements and supplies, French forces in Canada were gradually overwhelmed. One by one, the Ohio forts, Louisbourg, and Cape Breton fell and in 1759 Quebec was taken. It spelled the end for New France because in 1763, unlike 1748, there would be no territorial gains in Europe to barter for losses overseas. Nor was North America the end of this tale of woe. The nascent French empire in India was lost, and possessions in West Africa and the Caribbean seized. When peace came in 1763, it closed one of the most disastrous chapters in French military history.

The parlements: the enemy within?

Wars, especially unsuccessful ones, are notoriously expensive. By 1763, the French national debt stood at some 2,200 million *livres*, a figure comparable to that of 1715. Massive borrowing had been accompanied by a sharp rise in taxation. A second twentieth had been levied in 1756 and a third in 1760, while the capitation had been doubled in 1760. Indirect taxes had also proliferated, and, with no glorious feats of arms to ease the burden, it had become increasingly difficult to persuade the parlements to register fiscal edicts. Opposition in Paris had fanned out to the provinces with the parlements of Besançon, Dijon, Rennes, and Rouen amongst the more vociferous. Radical remonstrances, judicial strikes, and the exile of judges became commonplace. Self-interest played a part in motivating their opposition. Yet, despite their faults, the parlements also sought to articulate public grievances and probably saved the government from more damaging unrest in the process.

Louis XV was frequently angered by the resistance of the parlements. The failure of hardline policies in 1753 and 1756 had, however, taught him the virtue of caution. He was therefore willing to allow cardinal de Bernis, author of the recall of the parlement of Paris in September 1757, to pursue more conciliatory tactics. He worked closely with the parlement, dispensing patronage to its members and

seeking to defuse potential disputes before they became public crises in a manner reminiscent of Fleury. His disgrace in October 1758 produced many glum faces on the benches of the parlement, although any despair was premature. His replacement, the duke de Choiseul, shared the same general principles and until his fall in 1770 the Parisian magistrates enjoyed a complex relationship with the government that, at times, bordered on partnership.

Choiseul was an aristocratic freethinker whose skilful diplomacy secured better terms for the king at the peace of 1763 than he had the right to expect. In addition to preserving the Austrian alliance, he forged a solid Bourbon 'family compact' with Spain and oversaw the conquest of Corsica in 1769. The duke also turned his energy and talents towards the reconstruction of French military power with the aim of fighting a war of revenge against Britain. Under his guidance, much-needed military reform was begun and the navy was rebuilt, making possible the triumphs of the war of American Independence. To achieve his goals he needed money, and the duke concluded that more would be forthcoming from a policy of cooperation with the parlements. The most dramatic illustration of his approach was provided by the fate of the Jesuits. With the covert backing of Choiseul, who was anxious to court the fiercely anti-Jesuit Charles III of Spain, the Jansenist party in the parlement of Paris orchestrated a campaign that resulted in the expulsion of the religious order from France. The devout party at Court, led by the dauphin, and the clerical establishment was horrified. Yet it was noticeable that from April 1761, when the Jansenist magistrate Chauvelin first denounced the Jesuits, until the end of the Seven Years War, the parlement made no more remonstrances to the king.

Peace, as we have seen, brought a huge financial hangover. The finance minister, Bertin, was obliged to maintain high rates of taxation which he threatened to make more onerous by ordering a land survey designed to ensure that the twentieth was levied accurately. Howls of protest from the parlements indicated that he had struck a privileged nerve. Resistance was particularly fierce in Rouen, Toulouse, and Grenoble where there were attempts to arrest the military commanders bearing Bertin's orders. With its popularity and credit in tatters, the government capitulated and Louis XV transferred Bertin to other duties. Choiseul, aided and abetted by Pompadour, chose his replacement, the Parisian magistrate, L'Averdy.

The duke took a certain cynical delight in placing a parlementaire in charge of the treasury, but it was an intelligent tactic. L'Averdy brought integrity and goodwill to the office and quickly defused the crisis with the parlements. Although the land survey was abandoned, his ministry was more than just a capitulation to vested interests. He sought to reform the *taille*, reduce interest rates, and to work closely with the parlement. He did not solve the financial crisis, but the presence of a man universally recognized for his probity did revive confidence in the crown. L'Averdy was also prepared to listen to new ideas. In 1764, he was responsible for the first steps towards freeing the grain trade, a move that liberal economists hoped would stimulate notoriously backward French agriculture. No less daring was his reform of municipal government where venality was abolished in favour of elected officials. These measures pointed in the direction of the reforms of both the next reign and the Revolution, but as so often before they proved vulnerable once their author fell from office. L'Averdy was disgraced in 1768, and within four years his policies had been reversed. For reform measures to reach fruition required governmental stability, and that Louis XV was unable to provide

The Brittany affair

L'Averdy's appointment had been accompanied by that of René de Maupeou as keeper of the seals and his son René-Nicolas as first president of the parlement of Paris. Such a combination suggested that misunderstandings and conflicts with the magistrates would be a thing of the past. What wrecked these calculations was the refusal of the provincial parlements to do as they were told. The parlement of Rennes was amongst the most turbulent, becoming locked in a bitter controversy with the local military commander, the duke d'Aiguillon, about both taxation and local administration. In the summer of 1765, the magistrates pushed their resistance to the limit by resigning. Urged on by d'Aiguillon the government struck back, establishing a new parlement manned by his supporters and clients.

What turned a provincial crisis into one of the most damaging political scandals in French history was the arrest of d'Aiguillon's sworn enemy, the distinguished Breton magistrate and minor

philosophe, La Chalotais. During the summer of 1765, the secretary of state, Saint-Florentin, who was d'Aiguillon's uncle, received a series of anonymous notes insulting the king. The minister claimed to recognize the writing of La Chalotais, who was arrested and imprisoned. Over the next twelve months, he was subjected to what can be best described as a thoroughly incompetent show trial. Worse still, when the case against him collapsed he was sent into exile, where he remained until Louis XV's death.

La Chalotais might well be described as Louis XV's Fouquet, the subject of a vindictive punishment out of keeping with the king's normally mild character. It may be, however, that the possible involvement of La Chalotais in an intrigue over letters written by a former royal mistress was what outraged the king. Yet by 1765, it was no longer possible to lock away a national figure on the basis of royal whim, and the La Chalotais affair became a *cause célèbre* which split French elites in much the same way as the Dreyfus case would do more than a century later. Incensed by the government's flouting of basic legal principles, the parlement of Paris, seconded by the provincial courts, condemned royal policy in a flood of remonstrances. For the timorous, it seemed as if the union of classes had finally become a reality, and it determined the king to attend the parlement on 3 March 1766 to issue a stinging rebuke. In majestic tones he restated the basic principles of his own absolute authority, and no history of eighteenth-century France is complete without a reference to what contemporaries called the 'flagellation' of the parlement. In political terms, however, it was a one-day wonder. The parlements were not silenced and the case against La Chalotais collapsed. Nor did the remodelled parlement of Rennes survive. Its old members returned in triumph in 1769 within months of d'Aiguillon resigning from his post as military commander.

What stopped the Brittany affair from being just another failed attempt to weaken the parlements was the exile of La Chalotais. His colleagues refused to be silenced and blamed d'Aiguillon for his harsh treatment. The duke was a haughty and authoritarian man, convinced that he had followed the king's instructions to the letter. Determined to be publicly exonerated, he demanded satisfaction from the parlement of Paris, sitting as the court of peers. His decision would spark one revolution and prepare the ground for a second.

Maupeou's revolution

D'Aiguillon's willingness to stand trial derived, in part, from his growing political credit. His burning ambition was to replace Choiseul in the ministry and the bitter rivalry between the two men and their factions was the principal preoccupation of Versailles. In the struggle for the king's ear, d'Aiguillon and his uncle, Richelieu, adopted a classic strategy. They employed the charms of a beautiful courtesan to capture the credit and affection of the king. The ruse worked admirably and she was installed at Versailles in March 1769 with the title of Mme du Barry. Remarkably the devout party welcomed her arrival on the basis that God 'permits one evil to cure a greater one',⁴ meaning the ministry of Choiseul. They blamed him for the expulsion of the Jesuits and for royal weakness relative to the parlements. Yet d'Aiguillon and his allies would be disappointed. Du Barry lacked Pompadour's wit and ambition and her political influence was slight.

Choiseul had no sooner weathered one storm than he was confronted by another. In 1768, Maupeou the younger replaced his father as chancellor. Ambitious and tactless, he was soon at war with Choiseul, who scored a spectacular own goal by allowing his rival to choose a new finance minister in December 1769. The chancellor recruited Terray, a long-time ally in the parlement of Paris. No less ruthless than his benefactor, Terray surmounted a severe financial and economic crisis in February and March 1770 by implementing a partial bankruptcy. Opposition was muted because informed opinion realized that he had little choice. In justifying his policies to Louis XV, however, he took every opportunity to criticize the excessive military spending of Choiseul.

When d'Aiguillon's trial began in March 1770, therefore, both the Court and the ministry were riven by personal and factional feuds. Both Maupeou and Choiseul stood to gain if his reputation was tarnished and they almost certainly encouraged the parlement with that aim. Fearing conviction, d'Aiguillon used his influence with Louis XV to halt the trial in June and to issue letters patent clearing

⁴ Quoted in Duc de Castries, *La du Barry* (Paris, 1986), 73.

his name. As chancellor it was Maupeou who had to justify the sudden change of policy, and he was accused of acting arbitrarily. Despite a lifetime spent in the parlement and the prestige of his office, the chancellor had few friends amongst his former colleagues. Nor was he temperamentally inclined to compromise. Instead he sought to bully the magistrates into submission. When harsh words failed, he resorted to authoritarian methods, holding a bed of justice in December 1770 to impose a disciplinary edict that combined the rhetoric of the flagellation speech with restrictions on the parlement's rights of remonstrance. The magistrates refused to be intimidated and began a judicial strike. Many hoped that their resistance would topple the chancellor, but his position was strengthened by the disgrace of Choiseul on 24 December. He had incurred the king's wrath for risking war with Britain in defence of Spanish claims to the Falkland Islands. With the treasury bare, war would have been suicidal and Louis XV was spurred into action. Choiseul was dismissed and anxious letters were despatched to Madrid calming the bellicose Charles III.

With Choiseul gone, the devout party was in the ascendant and d'Aiguillon's appointment to the ministry imminent. Hated by the magistrates and isolated at court, Maupeou had little room for manoeuvre. It came as no surprise when the magistrates were exiled on 20 January 1771, but the resemblance to previous crises ended there.

Maupeou was an accidental revolutionary, but he was also a dynamic and resourceful one. The parlement of Paris was remodelled and venality abolished, although new magistrates were still appointed to their posts for life. Henceforth they were to be paid a salary, replacing the much criticized system of *épices* whereby judges received payments directly from litigants. The vast jurisdiction of the parlement was reduced and new courts created in towns such as Lyon, Poitiers, and Clermont Ferrand making justice more accessible to the people. The magistrates were still allowed to make remonstrances, albeit with the restrictions imposed in December 1770. When the provincial parlements protested, they too felt the heavy hand of the chancellor, who by the end of 1771 had effected what contemporaries christened 'Maupeou's revolution'.

Despite their enlightened veneer, the reforms of 1771 were hugely unpopular. For a generation weaned on Montesquieu's *Spirit of the*

Laws, the parlements were the intermediary powers which formed a barrier separating French monarchy from despotism. Maupeou was thus cast as the Turkish grand vizier, trampling French laws and liberties. Until his death in 1774, however, Louis XV supported the work of the chancellor. His actions should not be interpreted as a belated conversion to enlightened absolutism. The revolution of 1771 was the result of a particularly virulent case of Court and ministerial infighting, the sort of squabbling that had undermined French government since the death of Fleury. As so often before, the king had allowed a minister to take harsh measures against the magistrates and in Maupeou had found a man capable of making them stick. Yet the chancellor and his reforms were never secure because an elderly royal leopard could not change his spots. There was always the possibility that a fresh upheaval at Court or a new political crisis would engulf the chancellor. Indeed in 1774 d'Aiguillon, by now sitting in Choiseul's office as minister of war and foreign affairs, was plotting to overthrow Maupeou and recall the parlements. Nor was the public mood improved by the actions of Terray, who profited from the emasculation of the parlements to make the twentieth permanent and to collect other taxes more rigorously. By May 1774, royal finances were healthier than at any point for a generation, but the monarchy had rarely been more unpopular.

Conclusion

In May 1774, the still physically robust Louis XV contracted smallpox. Within a few days he was dead and like his great-grandfather before him was buried in haste to avoid unseemly celebrations. Yet the passing of the years would not bring nostalgia for a 'golden age' of Louis the well-beloved. Despite possessing many of the qualities needed to govern, the king had reigned but never ruled. Drift, discord, and instability were the hallmarks of his government and often gifted ministers spent more time attacking each other than addressing the problems of state. Louis XV had also lost the affection of his subjects. This was more than just the result of his scandalous private behaviour. Shy and ill at ease in the company of strangers, he found it impossible to project a positive image of monarchy. During his reign,

Paris acquired many of the magnificent buildings and squares that adorn it today. French literature and art flourished and, although it was only dimly perceived by contemporaries, the kingdom enjoyed sustained economic and population growth. The tragedy of Louis XV was that he failed to associate himself with this positive picture. Instead, after 1748 he locked himself away in his royal palaces, venturing only rarely to Paris and never to the provinces. Cut off from the public, Louis XV drained the well of affection for his person and encouraged the often exaggerated rumours about his conduct. The words of one disgruntled subject offer a sad epitaph for a reign of wasted opportunities:⁵

Ami des propos libertins,	You liked lewd talk,
Buveur fameux et roi célèbre	You loved your drink.
Par la chasse et par les catins:	A famous king—in hunting pink.
Voilà ton oraison funèbre.	Notorious in your taste for tarts: Obituarists need all their arts.

⁵ Mouffle d'Angerville, *The Private Life of Louis XV Annotated and Amplified by Quotations from Original and Unpublished Documents* (London, 1924). Lines translated by William Doyle.