

<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article2628>



V.11 On the excellence of the monarchical government

- The Spirit of Law - Book V. That the laws made by the legislator must be relative to the principle of the government -

Date de mise en ligne : mercredi 22 août 2018

Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés

V.11 On the excellence of the monarchical government

Monarchical government has a great advantage over despotic government. Since it is in its nature for there to be several orders under the prince which hold to the constitution, the state is more settled, the constitution more unshakable, and the person of those who govern more secure.

Cicero believes that the establishment of the tribunes in Rome was the salvation of the republic. Indeed, he says, "the strength of the people which has no leader is more terrifying. A leader can tell that the matter turns on him, and thinks about it ; but the people in its impetuosity does not know the peril into which it leaps." [1] This remark can be applied to a despotic state, which is a people without tribunes ; and to a monarchy, where the people have tribunes of a sort.

Indeed we see everywhere that, in the movements of the despotic government, the people led by itself always carries things as far as they can go. All the disorders it commits are extreme, whereas in monarchies things are very rarely carried to excess. The leaders fear for themselves ; they fear being abandoned ; the dependent intermediary authorities [2] do not want the people to get too much the upper hand. It is rare for the orders of the state to be entirely corrupted. The prince values these orders, and seditious persons who have neither the will nor the hope of overturning the state neither can nor wish to overturn the prince.

In these circumstances, people who have some wisdom and authority intervene ; they make compromises and agreements, and mend their ways ; the laws regain their vigor and make themselves heard.

And so it is that all our histories are full of civil wars without revolutions ; the histories of despotic states are full of revolutions without civil wars.

Those who have written the history of the civil wars of some states, the very ones which have fomented them, prove sufficiently that princes should not be wary of the authority they leave to certain orders for their service, since even in their agitation they were only yearning for the laws and for their duty, and restraining the fire and impetuosity of the seditious more than they could serve it. [3]

Cardinal de Richelieu, thinking perhaps that he had demeaned the orders of the state too much, to support it has recourse, to the virtues of the prince and ministers [4] ; and he requires so many things that in truth only an angel could have so much attention, insight, firmness, and knowledge ; and we can scarcely flatter ourselves that from now to the dissolution of monarchies there could be a comparable prince and comparable ministers.

As the peoples who live under a good political order are better off than those who wander with no rule or leaders in the forests, so too are monarchs who live under the fundamental laws of their state better off than despotic princes, who have nothing to control the hearts of their people or their own.

[1] Book III of *Laws*.

[2] See above the first note of Book II, ch. iv.

[3] *Memoirs* of the Cardinal de Retz and other histories.

[4] *Political Testament*.