

*Joachim Rendorp, An Argument Against Popular Rule, 1792*

Introduction: When the Patriots, inspired by the example of the American Revolution and radical Enlightenment ideas, attempted to reform the constitution of the Dutch Republic in a more democratic direction, political repression was imposed by the traditional oligarchy with the help of Prussian troops. Joachim Rendorp, a former Patriot, wealthy Amsterdam Regent and former burgomaster, wrote this defense of the traditional form of the Republic's government in 1792, including the role of the Prince of Orange as an hereditary stadholder. His former Patriot colleagues labeled Rendorp an 'aristocrat.' His defense of the Republic's government by an oligarchical group of wealthy Regents and the House of Orange has been compared to Edmund Burke's defense of Britain's oligarchical constitution against the more radical and democratic reforms championed by the French Revolution of 1789. The excerpt below, from *Memorien dienende tot Opheldering, van het Gebeurde, Geduurende den laatste Engelschen Oorlog* (Amsterdam, 1792), was translated from Dutch by Herbert H. Rowen, ed., *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York, 1972), pp. 250-54.

One of the principal accusations made against me was that of *Anglomania*. I freely confess that I wholly disapproved the war with England when it began, while it was being waged, and when it ended, because it was undertaken recklessly, fought badly, and concluded shamefully; that I would rather have seen an attempt made to obtain a better peace through separate negotiations, or at least that we had not trusted the Court of Versailles so rashly that we found ourselves compelled to accept a peace like this when that Court forced it upon us; and that I never was able to watch with approval while the Republic was subjected to the whim of the French Court in pretended recognition for its services during a war which in part it brought upon our heads, and while an effort was made to make the Republic more dependent upon France than it had ever been upon England.

But if I had developed any special predilection for England, any concern for special advantage or for increasing or just confirming influence, any base indulgence for the stadholder's way of thinking, I would despise myself: as I despise those who first fed the flames of this war out of a concern for their own advantage and to promote their private businesses, their political opinions, or anything else; who then catered to the wishes of France and discussed the most secret affairs of state with the French ambassador, and protected a number of seditious foreigners who helped them increase the agitation of popular feelings; and who further employed every kind of wile to achieve their aims, which, as later became evident, were none other than to change the form of government and to turn everything topsy-turvy.

The name of *Aristocrat* which was later conferred upon me was not yet in fashion. We can be sure that it was used as a taunt; but if it meant someone in whose judgment the citizens of our country had a right to no more or greater influence in the election of members of the government or in the conduct of its business than they had had ever since the foundation of the Republic in accordance with the privileges of the cities during the periods with and without stadholders, then I cannot deny it is a title which I deserve.

The only goal of all governments is to obtain the greatest possible prosperity of all members of society. If they are happy and their felicity is confirmed by continued experience, then the question *whether another and different form of government is better than that under which they live* is purely speculative. The leaders of those obviously bent on changing the constitution during the recent troubles should have given some thought to this, at least if they were acting in good faith.

Who will deny that there are many faults in our form of government? That the stadholders too often went beyond the bounds of their legitimate but inadequately defined authority? That the members of government during the stadholderless periods often neglected the general welfare out of concern for the interests of their cities or even for their own personal interests? That the structure of our form of government often results in faulty conduct of the affairs of state?

I willingly admit, therefore, that it would be possible to invent a better form of government. But the question is, would making changes in the present constitution make our country and its people happier? Or supposing that this were indeed true, can we flatter ourselves that we are able to change the constitution as it has been established for more than two hundred years without inflicting such a shock upon the country that every part of public administration will be adrift and without bearings, at least for some time? And finally, will the inhabitants (I mean men of property and not the riff-raff) be happier with the influence it is intended to confer on them under the common but vague term of "influence of the people"? That is, will our trade be more prosperous, our persons and property better protected from all violence, in a word, will our civil freedom be any greater than during the two hundred years which the present constitution has endured?

There is a clamor against "government by the Families." I am far from approving that anyone should seek a place in government in order to advance his relatives, but will it be any better if the government is elected by the citizens? Are most ordinary citizens, who would surely form the majority in an election, in a position to judge the abilities which are needed to guide affairs of state? Won't the mass of the electorate be led by intriguers or by a few influential men? Have we not recently seen what kind of men are able to win the trust of the crowd? Can we therefore expect that those elected to office will be competent and worthy men? Are those who arouse the common man by their intrigues, or who are favored by those who would set themselves up as the leaders of the crowd, better fitted to govern than those who get offices now through the influence of His Highness [the Prince of Orange] or their families? All things which require the intervention of human passions are usually, if not always, marked by faults: and that is always how it is with the grant of offices and positions, for favor will always play a part in it. Certainly there can be no better and more appropriate way to grant office than to entrust the task to one man, for he cannot help but have fewer personal relations to all members of society and hence will be more impartial. Has not experience taught that such relations are multiplied by the number of those who stand in his favor, and that in fact it is not the Prince but his favorites who grant offices?

Let us just look at the matter with an historical and impartial eye. Who did the shrieking during the various political revolutions which occurred in our country? I point to the friends of the House of Orange who were out of power during the stadholderless periods and wanted the Prince in power in order to increase their own authority, and to those who in the periods when there was a stadholder did not in their own opinion have as much authority in the government as they should or who had hardened their hearts against the stadholder because of some harm they had suffered.

The former shouted (and it was they who gave the tone to the people's voice) that only self-interest was practiced and the country's business was being neglected. The others in turn shouted that freedom was in danger, that the stadholder was trampling on privileges and rights.

Meanwhile how did things go in our country? Our persons and our property were as safe when there was no stadholder as when there was one and the simplest inhabitant could lead a

calm life in his status, safe from the supremacy of the notables.

The Republic experienced glorious moments when there was a stadholder and when there was none, but it is worth observing that the moments of greatest glory when there was no stadholder occurred when the leadership of the government was in the hands of one or a few men, who in fact had the authority of a stadholder and hence were able to make the numerous wheels of general government, which are turned by so many hands, all move to one and the same purpose.

This observation, which I believe is supported by the history of our country, brought me, during the time when I gained some insight into the country's affairs, to the conclusion that the office of stadholder is a necessary part of our constitution, and that, although there have been times when it was thought possible to do without a stadholder in his various capacities, these were always times which ended in revolts and violence. One reason was that the Dutch people as a whole learned devotion to the House of Orange from childhood; another, that those who did not have a share in the government let no opportunity pass to make use of this inclination by the people in the hope of enjoying the pleasure and advantage of governing in their turn.

This sort of selfish people (for such we must call them) must be distinguished from those who truly love their fatherland, seek neither private advantage nor public power, but use more exalted ideas to consider the conduct of government. They see the failings that do exist and they try to remedy them, but, alas! they lose sight of the fact that the perfect government which they want for their fatherland is not possible. Or they forget that even if it were possible, the means which would have to be used to establish it would put the commonwealth in danger of being turned topsy-turvy before the end they desired was attained. Hugo de Groot once rightly remarked that men should avoid making changes in old ways of government: *that such changes are dangerous and it is safer to accommodate oneself to faults to which the people are accustomed than to attempt to reform them.*

That is my way of thinking. Is it *Aristocratic*? So be it, unless by an *Aristocrat* we mean someone who seeks advancement in government for the sake of personal advantage or political power, who in office considers only himself and not the general good and devotes his authority and influence only to helping and favoring his relatives. In that case, I ask with a calm mind what honorable man dare gives me that title?