‘In many ways, Mirabeau’s dream of a patriot king deriving his power from the love of his subjects was not so far-fetched.’ (David Jordan) Do you agree?

The French Revolution threw Louis XVI and the Bourbon monarchy into crisis. What began as a push for a more consultative monarchy in the heady summer of 1789 spiralled out of control in the space of only four years, as events, personalities and the king’s own conduct conspired to make Louis XVI hated by his own subjects and robbed of his authority, his throne, and finally his life. The Revolutionary politician and ardent constitutional monarchist, the Comte de Mirabeau, envisioned Louis XVI endorsing the Revolution and its accomplishments, reigning as a patriotic citizen king and thereby winning the undying love of a grateful French public. This, Mirabeau fervently hoped, would ensure the survival of the French monarchy and simultaneously guarantee the gains of the Revolution. However, Mirabeau’s dream was an impossibility. Louis XVI was unable to reconcile himself to the Revolution as a result of his worldview, his inexorably decreasing popularity, and the Revolution’s failure to compromise with the Crown.

Louis XVI’s policy towards the French Revolution is a matter of ongoing debate. The king’s characteristic inexpressiveness and indecision has made Louis an ambiguous figure, and it has been particularly difficult for historians to deduce what Louis’s views and intentions were. Controversy has surrounded such questions as whether Louis was attempting to flee France in the Flight to Varennes, if he wished to suppress the Revolution as well as if he was prepared to enlist foreign armies for that purpose. Recent historians, such as John Hardman and Munro Price, have concluded that Louis XVI was probably willing to compromise and serve as constitutional monarch given the views he expressed in the manifesto, or declaration, which he penned before fleeing Paris in 1791.
Louis XVI could not be loyal to the Revolution, and for this reason the dream of Louis as constitutional monarch could never become a reality. Acceptance of the Revolution was an implicit requirement of Mirabeau’s proposition, which imagined the king endorsing the changes wrought by the moderate phase of the Revolution—between 1789 and early 1791—as a way to safeguard its political and social gains. But as both a king and an individual raised in the traditions of the ancien régime, Louis XVI was fundamentally incapable of coming to terms with the Revolution and its dramatic alterations to the state and society; in the king’s eyes, there was nothing ‘moderate’ about the creation of the National Assembly, nor its program for reshaping the nation.

At the very beginning of the Revolution—during the meeting of the Estates-General in 1789—the king, having realised something seditious was afoot, made clear that he wished tradition to prevail and that he would not tolerate overtly democratic politics:

The King desires that the ancient distinction between the three orders of the State be maintained in its entirety … Consequently, the King has declared void the decisions taken by the deputies of the order of the Third Estate in the seventeenth of this month and all subsequent ones as illegal and unconstitutional.

Here was the essence of what would become Louis XVI’s view of the Revolution. He believed its acts were improper and it had been achieved by means that were simply unlawful. Above all, Louis could not bear to see the social and religious order of France overturned. Before fleeing Paris in June 1791, Louis penned a declaration, in which

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he aired his grievances with the Revolution. The king, looking back to those fateful days of 1789, believed he had personally tried to remedy the discontent of his subjects, but had been repudiated:

The convocation of the Estates-General, the granting of double representation to the deputies of the Third Estate, the pains the king took to smooth away all the difficulties which could have delayed the meeting of the Estates-General and those which arose after their opening, all the king’s economies in his personal expenditure, all the powers which he surrendered to his peoples in the séance of 23 June; . . . all his painstaking solicitude, all his generosity, all his devotion to his people, all have been depreciated and distorted.5

Louis’s account of the Revolution reveals why he was so opposed to it. He thought he had offered generous concessions and that the revolutionaries had rebuffed him and subsequently enacted changes that were unnecessarily radical. Louis had displayed willingness to change the monarchy in order to help his people.6 In this respect, he exhibited features of a concerned, and even patriotic, king. But he could not be faithful to the Revolution, which wholly opposed his vision of France, which, as Tackett writes, “was a vision that set him on a collision course with the men and women of the French Revolution.”7 Louis could not fulfil Mirabeau’s hopes as a king who was for the Revolution; this had the added impact of ensuring he would draw the ire of the French public.

Rather than earning the adoration of the French during the Revolution, Louis XVI was increasingly alienated from his subjects, a result of his own actions and the outbreak of war with France’s enemies. The erosion of the public’s trust had begun at the meeting of the Estates-General when the king had sided with the nobility instead of the commoners.8 In an address to the National Assembly following the insurrection that

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6 Price, The Road From Versailles, 70.
7 Tackett, When the King Took Flight, 213.
toppled the king in August 1792, a deputation from the Paris Commune gave an account of the “conduct of Louis XVI since the first days of the Revolution,” listing his offences against the French people:

His bloody plans against the city of Paris, his predilection for nobles and priests, the aversion which he showed for the mass of the people… until a treacherous flight opened the eyes of even the citizens most blinded by slavish devotion.9

This shows that, by the end of Louis’s reign, the revolutionaries were able to paint a damning narrative of royal betrayal and deceit throughout the Revolution. The Commune pointed to the king’s bid to escape Paris in the Flight to Varennes as the most revealing act of betrayal. By fleeing, the king appeared to renounce his throne as well as show his contempt for the Revolution.10 The king’s midnight flight was seen by many to indicate that the king was seeking refuge among foreign powers, whom he wished to enlist to overthrow the Revolution. This was what characterised the Flight to Varennes as treacherous—not only had Louis renounced the crown of an enlightened, liberated kingdom of equals, he had attempted to snatch away the gains of the Revolution with monarchist armies from abroad.11 This was significant because from that moment on, not only was the king unpopular, he was perceived as a threat to the Revolution. In an unsigned memorandum written in Louis’s hand in July 1791,12 public mistrust of the king is revealed to have become a pressing concern for the monarchy:

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12 The memorandum was one of several documents from the armoire de fer—a hidden cabinet found in the Tuileries after the fall of the monarchy.
Of all the dangers that surround the King, I fear one in particular if it is prolonged. That is the mistrust felt by the people of His Majesty’s character and intentions.\(^\text{13}\)

The uncertainty surrounding the king’s character, integrity and trustworthiness as king is identified as the predominant issue facing Louis’s reign. The memorandum demonstrates that, far from being a beloved sovereign, the king was looked on with suspicion by his people. Just as Mirabeau anticipated the love of the public would be the answer to the monarchy’s woes, public resentment could just as easily be the cause of its ruin.

The actual onset of foreign war rapidly accelerated Louis’s descent into infamy. Following his attempted escape and in light of his lack of enthusiasm for the revolutionary government, the king came to be seen as a liability to the Revolution.\(^\text{14}\)

The Duke of Brunswick, on behalf of the Prussian king and Austrian emperor, published a declaration threatening the destruction of Paris if the king came to harm.\(^\text{15}\)

The ‘Brunswick Manifesto’ voiced the intention of Louis’s fellow monarchs to protect the king from his own subjects:

Their Majesties declaring, moreover, on their faith and word as emperor and king, that if the Palace of the Tuileries is forced or insulted, that if the least violence, the least outrage, is offered to their Majesties the king and queen, and to the royal family … they will take an exemplary and ever-memorable vengeance by giving up the city of Paris to military execution and total destruction, and the rebels guilty of outrages to the punishments which they shall have deserved.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^\text{15}\) Doyle, The Oxford History of the French Revolution, 2nd Ed., 188.
The manifesto clearly associated Louis with the enemies of France and the Revolution. The sense of national emergency generated by war, coupled with Louis’s association with the enemy destroyed the monarchy. Louis’s actions throughout the Revolution decreased his popularity and the legitimacy of his claim to rule in the eyes of Revolutionary France. The flight to Varennes decreased his popularity, ultimately causing the anger and resentment of the public. From the perspective of Louis’s subjects—particularly those who supported the Revolution—he appeared the antithesis of a patriot king, in cahoots with France’s enemies. Public affection would not see the king through the Revolution as Mirabeau had hoped; instead, anger and dissatisfaction would ultimately lead to the destruction of the monarchy.

At the heart of the unease between the king and the revolution was the Revolution’s reluctance to compromise with Louis XVI and its antagonism toward the monarchy. In July 1789, Louis had ceased to rule as an absolutist king; from that time on sovereignty was shared between a legislature and the monarchy. However, it was not a fair arrangement. The politicians of the Assembly controlled the terms on which Louis XVI exercised royal authority and were unwilling to share actual power with the king. The Constitution’s articles ‘Concerning Royal Sanction’ show the impotency of the monarchy:

1. The decrees of the legislative body are presented to the King, who may refuse his consent to them.
2. Should the King refuse his consent, this veto is only suspensive. When the two legislatures which follow that which presented the decree have successively represented the same decree in the same terms, the King shall be held to have given sanction. (My italics.)

17 Hardman, Louis XVI: The Silent King, 137.
19 Tackett, When the King Took Flight, 213.
The king’s function thus consisted of merely rubber-stamping the legislation of the Assembly—he could exercise very little control over the way France was governed. This reveals the low regard the Assembly had for the king and the lack of compromise offered by the revolutionaries. In his declaration of June 1791, Louis fumed over the farcical nature of royal authority, as it had existed since 1789:

As long as the king could hope to see order and prosperity restored to the kingdom by the measures employed by the Assembly and by his residence near that assembly at the capital he counted as naught any personal sacrifices. … the sole recompense for so many sacrifices is to behold the destruction of the monarchy, authority flouted … and total anarchy trample on the laws without the semblance of authority given him by the new constitution being sufficient to cure any of the ills afflicting the kingdom. 21

Louis draws a link between the Revolution’s repudiation of the monarchy and his loss of interest in cooperating with the Assembly. Price asserts that, for a time, Louis was willing to serve as a constitutional monarch; but the radical and antimonarchical character of the Constitution of 1791 alienated the king.22 As Louis himself writes of the antagonism toward the monarchy:

The more the king made sacrifices for the good of his peoples, the more the men of faction have worked to devalue the cost and paint the monarchy in the most false and lurid terms.23

By ‘the men of faction,’ Louis refers to radical politicians who believed power should lie almost totally with the Assembly—and not be shared with the monarchy. The king’s experience of dealing with the Assembly made him lose faith in the prospect of a workable compromise leading him to believe cooperating with the Revolution was both

useless and unpalatable and spurring him to flee Paris, forever dashing hopes of a constitutional monarchy.

Mirabeau’s dream of Louis proving himself both a king and a man of the Revolution is more fittingly described as a fantasy. After his attempt to escape from the Revolution was foiled at Varennes, his reputation as king was irreparably damaged and his survival as monarch was forever divorced from the continuation of the Revolution in the minds of the French public. For this reason he could not be classed as either a patriotic or a beloved king. Having forfeited the love of his subjects, the king could not improve his position through popular appeal, nor could he derive power from the inequitable constitutional arrangement between him and the Assembly. This trajectory would lead to the monarchy’s downfall in August of 1792 and his eventual execution.

In fact, Mirabeau’s dream had died some time before Louis mounted the scaffold in 1793. It would be over a decade before monarchy and the Revolution were finally reconciled by Napoleon.

This essay received a High Distinction (HD). Here we have pointed out the ways in which this essay makes a strong, connected, well-evidenced and analysed argument. No piece of writing is perfect, and therefore as you read through you may have found points that you thought could have been improved. The nature of writing is that it can always be better. In this example, we focused on all the many exemplary features of this essay, and we hope you found it useful and applicable to your own academic writing tasks at ANU.
Bibliography

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