Robinson’s Note: Louis XVI had been suspended August 10 on account of the misgivings which his conduct inspired. The debate carried on six weeks later, during the opening session of the Convention, September 21, 1792, well illustrates the attitude of the new Assembly toward the ancient monarchy and serves to introduce some of the men who were soon to be most active during the Reign of Terror.

The citizens chosen by the French people to form the National Convention having assembled to the number of three hundred and seventy one, and having examined the credentials of the members, declare that the National Convention is organized . . .

M. Manuel. Representatives of the sovereign people: the task which devolves upon you demands the power and wisdom of gods themselves. When Cineas entered the Roman senate he thought he beheld an assembly of kings. Such a comparison would be an insult to you. Here we see an assembly of philosophers occupied in preparing the way for the happiness of the world. I move that the president of France have his residence in the national palace, that the symbols of law and power be always at his side, and that every time that he opens a session all the citizens shall rise. This act of homage to the sovereignty of the people will constantly recall to us our rights and duties.

M. Simon. I move that the Assembly declare that they will never deliberate except in the presence of the people.

The President. Your motion, having no relation to the previous motion, I cannot give the floor to those who wish to support or oppose your proposition until the Assembly has passed upon the motion of Monsieur Manuel.

M. Mathieu. I am doubtful whether the discussion suggested by Monsieur Manuel should take precedence in our deliberations. Our predecessors lost much time in determining the exact dimensions of the chair of the former king. We do not wish to commit the same error. . .
M. Chabot. Representatives of the people: I oppose the motion made by Citizen Manuel. I am astonished that Citizen Manuel, after having repudiated every idea of any comparison with kings, should propose to make one of our members like a king. The French nation, by sending to the Convention two hundred members of the legislative body who have individually taken an oath to combat both kings and royalty, has made itself quite clear as to its desire to establish a popular government. It is not only the name of king that it would abolish but everything which suggests preeminence, so that there will be no president of France. You cannot look for any other kind of dignity than associating with the sans-culottes who compose the majority of the nation. Only by making yourselves like your fellow-citizens will you acquire the necessary dignity to cause your decrees to be respected.

M. Tallien. I am much astonished to hear this discussion about ceremonials. . . . Outside of this hall the president of the Convention is a simple citizen. If you want to speak to him, you can go and look for him on the third or the fifth floor. There is where virtue has its lodging.

The Assembly unanimously rejected the motion of Monsieur Manuel.

M. Tallien. I move that before everything else the Assembly take a solemn pledge not to separate till it has given the French people a government established on the foundations of liberty and equality. I move that the members take an oath to make no laws which depart from this standard, and that this oath shall constantly guide the representatives of the people in their work. Those who shall perjure themselves shall be immolated to the just vengeance of the people. . . [Applause.]

M. Merlin. I move that we do not take any oaths. Let us promise the people to save them. Let us go to work. M. Couthon. . . . I am not afraid that, in the discussion which is about to take place, any-one will dare to speak of royalty again; it is fit only for slaves, and the French would be unworthy of the liberty which they have acquired should (448) they dream of retaining a form of government branded by fourteen centuries of crime. But it is not royalty alone that must be eliminated from our constitution, but every kind of individual power which tends to restrict the rights of the people and violate the principles of equality.

M. Philippeaux. There is a still more pressing subject; that is, to furnish the organs of the law the necessary power to maintain public tranquility. I move that you maintain provisionally in power all the authorities now in existence. . . M. Camus. The most essential thing is to order that the taxes continue to be collected, for you know that they have to be voted at the opening of every new legislature.

The motions of Messieurs Philippeaux and Camus were unanimously passed.

M. Collot d'Herbois. You have just taken a wise resolution, but there is one which you cannot postpone until the morrow, or even until this evening, or indeed for a single
instant, without being faithless to the wish of the nation, - that is the abolition of royalty. [Unanimous applause.]

M. Quinette. We are not the judges of royalty; that belongs to the people. Our business is to make a concrete government, and the people will then choose between the old form where there was royalty and that which we shall submit to them. . . .

M. Gregoire. Assuredly no one of us would ever propose to retain in France the fatal race of kings; we all know but too well that dynasties have never been anything else than rapacious tribes who lived on nothing, but human flesh. It is necessary completely to reassure the friends of liberty. We must destroy this talisman, whose magic power is still sufficient to stupefy many a man. I move accordingly that you sanction by a solemn law the abolition of royalty.

The entire Assembly rose by a spontaneous movement and passed the motion of Monsieur Gregoire by acclamation.

M. Bazire. I rise to a point of order. . . . It would be a frightful example for the people to see an Assembly commissioned with its dearest interests voting in a moment of enthusiasm. I move that the question be discussed.

(449) M. Gregoire. Surely it is quite unnecessary to discuss what everybody agrees on. Kings are in the moral order what monsters are in the physical. Courts are the workshops of crimes, the lair of tyrants. The history of kings is the martyrlogy of nations. Since we are all convinced of the truth of this, why discuss it? I demand that my motion be put to vote, and that later it be supplied with a formal justification worthy of the solemnity of the decree.

M. Ducos. The form of your decree would be only the history of the crimes of Louis XVI, a history already but too well known to the French people. I demand that it be drawn up in the simplest terms. There is no need of explanation after the knowledge which has been spread abroad by the events of August 10.

The discussion was closed. There was a profound silence. The motion of Monsieur Gregoire, put to vote, was adopted amidst the liveliest applause:

‘The National Convention decrees that royalty is abolished in France.

Proclamation of the Convention to the Nations, December 1792

Editor's Note: The Convention, after ridding France of the institution of monarchy, proposed to make its armies a means of propagating liberty and reform throughout Europe. it-accordingly prepared a proclamation to be published in those countries which already were, or should be, occupied by the armies of the new French republic.

The French people to the people of ____________; brothers and friends:
We have conquered our liberty and we shall maintain it. We offer to bring this
inestimable blessing to you, for it has always been rightly ours, and only by a crime have
our oppressors robbed us of it. We have driven out your tyrants. Show yourselves free
men and we will protect you from their vengeance, their machinations, or their return.

From this moment the French nation proclaims the sovereignty of the people, the
suppression of all civil and military authorities which have hitherto governed you and of
all which the taxes which you bear, under whatever form, the abolition (450) of the tithe,
of feudalism, of seigniorial rights and monopolies of every kind, of serfdom, whether real
or personal, of hunting and fishing privileges, of the corvée, the salt tax, the tolls and
local imposts, and, in general, of all the various kinds of taxes with which you have been
loaded by your usurpers; it also proclaims the abolition among you of all noble and
ecclesiastical corporations and of all prerogatives and privileges opposed to equality. You
are, from this moment, brothers and friends; all are citizens, equal in rights, and all are
alike called to govern, to serve, and to defend your country.[1]

Footnotes

[1] In the decree of the Convention to which the above proclamation was appended, we
find (Article II): The French nation declares that it will treat as enemies every people
who, refusing liberty and quality or renouncing them, may wish to maintain, recall, or
treat with the prince and the privileged classes; on the other hand, it engages not to
subscribe to any treaty and not to lay down its arms until the sovereignty and
independence of the people whose territory the troops of the republic shall have entered
shall be established, and until the people shall have adopted the principles of equality and
founded a free and democratic government.