

Habsburg H-Net Discussion Network
Metternich on Opposition in the Pressburg Diet

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Prince Richard Metternich, ed. MEMOIRS OF PRINCE METTERNICH, 1815-1829.
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THE OPPOSITION IN THE DIET OF PRESSBURG. 1825.

Metternich to the President of the lower House: Vienna, December 11, 1825.

784. I have given to your letter of the 10th inst. the full attention demanded by the interesting nature of its contents, and increased by the great weight which I attach to your personal opinions in so critical and important a period as the present. My mind endeavours always to grasp the essential substance of things, to get at the root of the evil; symptoms are only useful in my eyes so far as they are instructive, and I allow them to pass quickly before me, merely following their traces, because, if quietly shielded, they may guide us to fundamental truths. Seldom in my public life have I come upon these latter so quickly as with respect to the concerns of the present Diet: for this reason, that in Hungary I encounter all those things on which during my whole public life, especially during the last ten years, I have made war. The Diet has entirely taken my ground. I did not move from my position for so long that I came to know every spot of ground in its whole extent. As I am always anxious to communicate with you, and as your last letter and our last conversation assured me that we understand each other, I ask you to consider the following remarks:

In Hungary the Government has to struggle with

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two Oppositions: one, the natural result of circumstances, is the old Hungarian opposition; the other represents the spirit of the age. When the Diet was opened these two Oppositions were mingled together; time alone will be able to separate them, and this will and must be done if Government keeps invariably to the right, in a really constitutional sense. The Hungarian opposition, which sincerely desires to sustain the Constitution, will be paralysed by this line of conduct, and unconsciously take the same position as that on which the King himself has taken his stand. The notions of the Opposition about the Constitution are indeed strange and in many points entirely wrong, but are always based on loyalty and patriotism; and such an Opposition could only be dangerous for a Government whose wishes were the reverse of those honestly entertained by the King. The

second Opposition desires disorder, for this is its natural element; and by feigning to support the Constitution it only makes use of it as a kind of weapon to attack Government--that is, authority. Monarchy is the great object of its hatred, and consequently also the Hungarian Monarchical Constitution. With regard to this matter I will send you some not unimportant notes. The firmness shown by yourself and the Archduke in the last session must have separated these two Oppositions.

. . . I will now in the strictest confidence give you some particulars of what occurred between young count Stephan Széchényi and myself. I know this young man from the beginning of his career, and I have done a great deal for him. He has quick parts, but, like most of our young people, no solid knowledge--a want which he makes up for by a kind of cultivated instinct. His ambition is boundless; he is not frivolous, but a sort of

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political spitfire, although he can be deep enough sometimes.

During my stay in Pressburg I observed (without showing it) that he wished to open his heart to me. I gave him the opportunity of doing so without directly touching the point. At last, a week after the Court's departure, he called on me, expressing his desire for a confidential conference. I made him understand that I could both speak and listen.

He now went into the subject, talking a great deal against absolutism, against the supposed opinions of Government, on the ignorance the Court had shown with respect to Hungarian affairs, on his anxiety that the Diet would come to a bad end, &c. It was the day on which the Royal answer upon the first address of the Diet had been published. I told him that I was quite ready to discuss the Royal resolution. Point for point I brought forward, silencing him so thoroughly that he left me with the remark that I was entirely right. Then he went back to his club, to change his opinions again. The day of my departure from Pressburg I received the letter (No. 785) I now enclose, and I informed him that I should be very pleased to enter into real discussions about its contents. Expecting him every day--as he had said to my commissioner that he would call on me immediately--I marked his letter with marginal notes, and you will find them on the copy.

Meanwhile time passed away; the last royal rescript had been issued, and the face of affairs was entirely changed. Some days ago Count Széchényi presented himself to me. His friends here had observed a strange disturbance in his deportment. The first look I gave him confirmed this. I received him kindly, telling him I was still quite willing to make my observations on his

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last letter, although affairs had been changed in their most essential points. He expressed his readiness to hear them, and had nothing to object after my reading his own letters and

my notes. This done, I told him I was about to speak of his personal position as my conscience and my heart prompted. I acknowledged that I considered him as a man lost through vanity and ambition--one of those who bring unhappiness upon themselves.

The Count, much affected, interrupted me here, entering into an exposition of his opinions, which are in the main as follows:-He is, he says, a man of active and ambitious mind, who desires to leave to posterity an honoured name. He has undertaken a part which, although difficult to maintain, promises a rich reward. The shallowness and apathy of the Hungarian magnates grieved him deeply, and he had therefore determined to endeavour at least to animate the Hungarian youth. As it was their fate to go astray, they much needed a guide, who ought to be a good and faithful subject and patriot to fill properly a position demanding so much tact and consideration. This position he had attained, and would try to use it to support his Majesty's good designs, &c.

I replied that no doubt he gave a true account of his feelings, but that they only confirmed me in my conviction that he was a 'lost man.' To prove to him that I was not wrong, I would only ask peremptorily whether he would dare to make the same confessions to his friends as he had made to me. He answered unhesitatingly that this would be impossible.

Then you must be a traitor either to me or to your friends--that is to say, a traitor to yourself: that which never has prospered, never will prosper, and you will

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pass through the same dismal experience as all who have taken the same line have gone through before you -- you will sink into the mire; or if you turn round you will be branded by the very party that led you astray.'

The conversation that ensued showed me that Count Széchényi, when quite calm, would think as I do; he complained of the extravagance of his young friends' ideas, and described some of them as mere madmen, who made the American Republic the model after which they strove. These he opposes, and hopes to convert some of them to his views.

After a discussion of three hours, he left me, much moved and dejected; and as this took place at the time when I usually receive visitors, I should not be much astonished if the fact of so long a conversation between Széchényi and myself would soon be generally known.

I give you all these details, because they throw light on the situation in Pressburg. It appears to be evident that the Széchényi-Karoly Club belongs to the new Opposition, and that one of its leading men is not at all satisfied with it. And thus it will be, if the Government remains firm, and proclaims the truth honestly. This has conquered other things than the excitement in Pressburg.

I have shown you more than once that the party in Opposition looks upon the Circular-Sessions (Circular-Sitzungen) as the best means of furthering its bad and foolish plans. As long as this heaven is not removed, order cannot be thought of: The question only remains how and when this beneficial work can be undertaken-a question which no one can answer better than yourself.

The object of the moment will be to point out to the old Opposition that the new Opposition runs counter to all its constitutional labours. If once the two parties

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are divided, it would be best to spare the latter of the two; but to eradicate the other entirely, for it spreads like a horrible disease.

If your Excellency had yielded at the session of the 8th inst., the affair would have been lost in principle for the Government and the old Opposition. You have therefore by your firm conduct rendered a very important service. I am, with respect, &c. &c.

METTERNICH.

Letters of Colonel Count Stephan Széchenyi to Prince Metternich.

(With marginal notes by Metternich.)

785. Pressburg, November 16, 1826.-Most Serene Highness! Some days ago, you were so good as to permit the discussion of a subject which, as it concerns my country, of course interests me deeply.

It cannot be denied that the chief cause of many of the evils of the world is merely misunderstanding, and that sometimes the smallest trifle, even one little word, might turn to advantage an affair lost for want of thorough explanation. Your Highness has not asked my opinions on the affairs of the Diet; and, as I do not possess the deep and intimate knowledge which would enable me to make new disclosures to your Highness, I feel somewhat embarrassed in writing to you. But these considerations must not hinder me from fulfilling my duty, by drawing your attention to some circumstances and some objects which you, in your elevated position, can see less clearly than I who have them close before my eyes.

(a.) The idea that matters belonging to the administration are less clearly seen from an elevated position than from a lower one, is not always correct. He sees who has good eyes,

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and the larger the space extended before him may be, the surer he is to see rightly. The first advantage of a high position is that it enables us to rise above the prejudices of the masses; and, since it is not given to man to be free from error, higher positions present at least the possibility of an extended influence not to be attained in narrower spheres.

Your Highness told me, the other day, that most people judge of objects wrongly because they do not examine from all points their own position, the general circumstances, and their power of influencing it. We ought, you said, to be provided with everything likely to throw light on the object to be judged of.

With regard to the Diet, I venture to state my humble opinion that, although your acquaintance with the Hungarian Constitution excited my greatest astonishment, your information on some points was not absolutely correct, and your opinions sometimes erroneous. I am therefore convinced that I do you a service by drawing your attention to some matters which have escaped your notice, telling you quite honestly what others dare not or will not tell you.

Your Highness must permit me to remind you that we agreed to consider the distrust of the States of the Government as the chief cause of all the disagreeables (if I may so call them) which have occurred. Distrust is want of confidence; and how is it possible, without changing human nature, that confidence can reign where promises are seldom kept; where the law is always explained in favour of the King, and to the disadvantage of the people; and where, to speak plainly, affairs just now have the appearance as if the Constitution were on the point of being overturned?

(b.) Trust and distrust are doubtless fruits of experience. But under certain conditions and in certain times they may be

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mere delusions. I know only one period of Hungarian history in which Government threatened the Constitution. This was in the reign of the Emperor Joseph, much praised by the Liberals. In the year 1790-1, the Constitution became nominally and actually stronger than it had been before Joseph II's accession to the throne. In the next reign, that of the Emperor Francis I., there were twenty-six years of war. The six Diets, held in the general agitation, show not the smallest trace of want of respect to the Constitution on the part of the King. Now, in a time of peace and security, his Majesty has convoked the 'Reichstag,' and has given expression to those feelings which have been the firm and noble basis of his reign for thirty years.

What reason is there for distrust? It cannot be the principles of the monarch; for why should he exclude Hungary alone from the principle he has so often and so openly proclaimed in Hungary as elsewhere-'the maintenance of all existing rights'? Why should he give the lie to himself before his people and before the whole of Europe? If it was only want of experience which was the cause of the phenomena at the Diet, the Royal speech

should have overcome them; for he does not speak as the Emperor spoke who intends to do the reverse of his words.

Is the distrust based upon facts? Why not expose them; why not be ready to have them explained?

Is there not a good deal of calculation in the manifestation of distrust? Is it not possible that Hungary has caught the malady of the time? Is there not in Hungary, as everywhere, a party to whom authority is disgusting, which uses law to cover private interests, and a systematic opposition as a means of gaining popularity? The further course of proceedings will prove if this be true.

I could prove all this by examples, and if you will judge impartially you will find I am right. But I will not detain you except on the essential matter of the Diet. His Majesty has gratified the States by a fatherly address, asking them to discuss the consolidation of the Constitution. The States, keeping firmly to their laws

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and customs, have been working and discussing for four weeks. At last they present most respectfully their memorial, the merit of which I will neither discuss for or against, being beside the question and not belonging to my subject. But there can be no doubt that the States consider the points mentioned in the above-named memorial as the most important means of supporting their Constitution, and are convinced that in presenting it to his Majesty they fulfilled their duty to their King and their country. Some weeks afterwards his Majesty's decision was made known to the States, the contents of which plainly express the principles of a quite absolute monarchy.

(c.) This representation of facts might be disputed as to its most essential points. It is true that his Majesty has expressed the sincere desire to fortify the Constitution by filling up the deficiencies of legislation, by reforming the administration of law, by establishing certain institutions which secure to a country, richly endowed by nature, the advantage of well-regulated industry, as health and well-regulated strength alone enable our bodies to enjoy life. Again, it is true that the States, after the loss of four weeks as far as public matters are concerned, have expressed their complaint against some facts and asked for some measures, the cause and rights of which I will not discuss here. It cannot be denied that the answer was delayed, but this was the will of Heaven, for the King fell ill.

What value the explanations in regard to the principles of absolutism supposed to be expressed in the Royal resolution really possess, the next answer of his Majesty will bring to light.... Opposition counselled by passion will rarely hit the mark.

I am not going to examine how far it may be right or wrong to look for the principle of absolutism in the above-named Royal resolution. I will only ask if it is possible that the States, which cannot see any other

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meaning in it, can have after all much confidence, or if the anxiety be not pardonable which urges them to gain security on certain points of the constitution.

(d.) Where no other sense can be found, further examination is certainly superfluous. The question whether the Prince's words do contain the sense of absolutism appears to me more to the purpose.

Can we ask a man who fears that his house is falling, to discuss the improvement and comfort of the interior?

(e.) No! But he would do wisely not to be alarmed till he has quietly examined whether his anxiety is justified, or if it be only a chimera.

Your Highness respects and honours all institutions which custom has sanctioned; the fundamental idea of your principles is legitimacy. You are so logical in your political and private life, that I am convinced of your wish to maintain the constitution of Hungary in all its cardinal points as pure and sound as it was before the accession of the present dynasty.

(f.) The maintenance of the Hungarian Constitution must in every respect be considered so sacred a duty of the ministry, and so plain a command of right and prudence, that I should destroy my whole former political life by lending a willing ear to the contrary. But the more firmly and steadfastly I have taken my stand, the more freely I have a right to pronounce my confession of faith, which is as follows:-

The Constitution will never be threatened by a wise and just King. That which has defied the storms of time for eight centuries has proved its strength.

The dangers which threatened the Constitution come from a very different source. In times of violence, of bold experiments, in times when experience is insulted and displaced by theory, long-tried customs have always to go through hard struggles. Nowhere can such rich material for combat be found as in the whole affairs of Hungary. What in other States

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would simply be regarded as a change of form, would in Hungary endanger property, existence, and legal rights, and end in destruction. The changes wrought by time therefore bring danger, and what judgment can the calm observer, the true friend of Constitution, form of men who charge the King -- and what is more, the present King-with the attacks with which his enemies threaten the general welfare ?

I must be very much mistaken if I interpret the leading idea of the conversation with which your Highness honoured me the other day, in any other sense when you compared our Hungarian Constitution with a precious jewel which ought to be kept like a relic.

(g.) This remark contains all that I have said above.

When I reflect on this, as I hope, false conception of our situation, and the groundless anxiety of the States as a source of much evil, I cannot but lament that mutual enlightenments and explanations are not insisted on, the more as it would be easy to satisfy the States without violating the least right of his Majesty.

(h.) I believe that I may guarantee the fulfilment of this excellent desire, which is also mine.

To attain this purpose his Majesty should in his next resolution express the sincere constitutional feeling which he affirmed by oath on his accession to the throne. All the remarks which seemed to lean to absolutism would, if not repeated, be forgotten of themselves.

(i.) His Majesty must go further and proclaim, as error, what is error.

His Majesty should permit, without any condition, the legal convocation of the Diet, and this permission ought to be entirely independent of other political events and circumstances, as it touches upon the funda-

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mental element of the Constitution clearly expressed in our laws and binding on the King.

Your Highness must confess that my countrymen, even if they have appeared to disadvantage, are worthy of the confidence of a just monarch. Can a man be a loyal subject of his King who does not cleave vigorously to the laws of his country? I do not believe it, and I shall always doubt the true worth of him who is unable manfully to defend his rights. I am convinced that I shall not offend your Highness by this letter, written with the greatest respect, for truth never offends one who is true himself. I am, &c.

STEPHEN COUNT SZÉCHÉNYI.

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