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ABSOLUTE MONARCHY IN LATER EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DENMARK: CENTRALIZED REFORM, PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS, AND THE COPENHAGEN PRESS*

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ABSTRACT. *By the later eighteenth century, the Danish–Norwegian monarchy had a convincing track record for stability and the near-absence of domestic unrest. That stability, despite the wide-ranging claims of the Royal Law of 1665, depended less on force than on a consensus derived from religious unity, a traditionally approachable monarch, and a fairly accessible system of justice. But the crown also relied on a widespread loyalty which was bound to come under strain at the accession of the demented Christian VII in 1766. Despite the removal of censorship restrictions in 1770, however, a convincing public discussion of social and political issues was slow to emerge. Only after the resolution of the political crisis in 1784 did the government feel sufficiently secure not only to tolerate, but even to come to rely on, an unprecedented if moderate public debate. That debate, as reflected through samples of the Copenhagen press studied here, remained even in the 1790s largely supportive of the view that absolutism offered a viable way to lasting reform.*

One of the volumes of Diderot's *Encyclopédie* published belatedly in 1765 included a set of entries under the heading 'Monarchy', written by Jaucourt. The content was intentionally uncontroversial: absolute monarchy was described in general terms as being limited by its very nature, by its fundamental laws, and by the terms on which the crown held power on behalf of its subjects. Understandably, Jaucourt was too cautious to risk elaboration in terms of France itself, but he did make some suggestive wider comparisons. He argued that while England had achieved a uniquely successful blend of limited hereditary monarchy and permanent legislature, the other European monarchies 'each have their own particular distribution [of powers] according to which they are more or less close to political liberty. It seems that this

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precious advantage is as much enjoyed in Sweden, as it is remote in Denmark; whilst monarchy in Russian is pure despotism.'[1]

On the face of its, the basis for such summary criticism of Danish conditions seemed obvious. Following virtual military collapse at the hands of the Swedes in the late 1650s, the Danish–Norwegian crown had been instrumental in carrying through what amounted to a political coup in 1660. The old aristocratic conciliar form of government, and the string of royal electoral charters on which it had been based since 1282, were annulled. The estates general was used to legalize this move, and then disbanded for ever. A few months later, in a formal declaration against which there was in effect no appeal, the monarchy was declared hereditary and absolute.[2]

Given the uncompromising appearance of Danish absolutism as it emerged in the later seventeenth century,[3] the commiseration offered notably by British and French observers over the next century is understandable. In his often quoted report on Denmark in 1692, the British ambassador Robert Molesworth noted that the Danes had already become so used to their servile condition that they did not even object to the heavy taxes resulting from the misguided military ambitions of their autocratic government. He also noted, however,

[1] Article on 'Monarchie limitée', in the *Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1751–72), x (1765), p. 637. A similar view was expressed a few years later by Abbé Raynal, in his widely read *Histoire philosophique et politique des … deux Indes* (first published 1770, revised Amsterdam, 1774), iv, p. 392, where he sees the Danes lapsing into 'lethargy' after 1660. Neither of these comments appears to have been picked out for review in the Danish press.

[2] The decree of hereditary absolute monarchy (10 Jan. 1661) was not approved at one single formal meeting, but circulated for individual signature by magnates and representatives of the clergy and major town corporations. Beyond a few general points, it gave little clue as to the form the new monarchical government should take. The text of the Royal Law of 1665, though also quite short, was richer in significant detail. It referred to divine intervention which had rescued the kingdom from certain ruin and collapse in 1660, but also noted that the council of the realm and the assembled estates had agreed to relinquish earlier prerogatives and render the electoral capitulation null and void. The council and estates had agreed, 'uncompelled and without any instigation, request or command from us, of their own free will … to surrender to us the hereditary right to these our kingdoms … as well as to all Jura Majestatis, absolute power, sovereignty and all royal privileges and regalia'. This was something of an oversimplication of the complex process that had led to the surrender of power by the estates; but essentially there had been no alternative, given the deep divisions within the estates (especially within the nobility) and the desperate condition of the country after the war. For the formal texts, see E. Ekman, 'The Danish Royal Law of 1665', *Journal of Modern History*, 19 (1957), pp. 102–7; the full text, with that of the electoral capitulations from 1282 onwards, is found in *Samling af danske Kongers Haandfæstninger og andre lignende Acter* (Copenhagen, 1856–8, reprinted in 1974 by Selskabet for Udgivelser af Kilder til Dansk Historie). For a short account of the coup of 1660 and its consequences, see T. Munck, *The peasantry and the early absolute monarchy in Denmark, 1660–1708* (Copenhagen, 1979), pp. 39–58.

[3] Clause 16 of the Royal Law spelt out that since the hereditary right in the male and female line was total and unrestricted for eternity, the death of an incumbent ruler would automatically and instantaneously secure the unconditional succession of the heir, without the need for any further formality; nevertheless, to show to the world that the king is humble before God, a public ceremony of *anointment* would take place – in other words, a full coronation was dispensed with, to be replaced (significantly) with a public affirmation of the spiritual relationship between king and God. The substantial practical ramifications of this view of monarchical absolutism were outlined a generation later, in the introduction to the law code of 1683, cited in T. Munck, *Seventeenth century Europe, 1598–1700* (London, 1990), p. 340.

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that whilst there was much in the Danish case 'to be avoided, and little deserving of imitation', there was one outstanding exception – the kingdom's laws and its judicial system, which he described as equitable, accessible, and inexpensive. He saw this as a partial explanation of why Danish society was relatively peaceful, but recognized that other reasons must be sought to explain why there were 'no Seditions, Mutinies or Libels against the Government'.[4] He might have added that there was not even much overt oppression, and that, remarkably by the standards of the time, the Danish army never became a significant factor in maintaining domestic stability.

It is now obvious that the Danish–Norwegian monarchy, like other European states, had neither the means nor the intention of implementing a genuinely authoritarian regime. Molesworth's observations may have been coloured by his experience of a very different political order in post-revolutionary England. Nevertheless he did have the advantage of first-hand observation, and his comments are sufficiently specific to merit closer attention. This article seeks to clarify why the domestic stability of the Danish–Norwegian monarchy was never seriously challenged during the eighteenth century. It will do so first by examining in broad terms the period up to 1766, by which time we can discern some important features not paralleled in the greater monarchies of the west. The discussion will then focus in more detail on the exceptional circumstances of the reign of Christian VII (1766–1808). The king's rapidly deteriorating mental condition soon made absolutism itself appear fundamentally flawed, and attempts to get round the problem merely brought the threat of real despotism closer. The unexpected turn of events in 1784, however, paved the way for changes that not only restored the basic credibility of the system, but also, judging at least from the press and contemporary pamphlets, seems to have gone a long way towards positively satisfying the expectations of key groups in society. The programme of reforms implemented from the late 1780s onwards may appear modest by the standards of, say, Emperor Joseph II and his brother Leopold; but sufficient consensus was achieved to allow the kingdom to survive the revolutionary period of the early 1790s with only minimal internal tensions.

I

A common characteristic of much popular resistance to government demands in early modern Europe was simple geographic distance: a central government in a remote capital, acting sometimes with little apparent understanding of local conditions, or imposing burdens out of tune with the perceived interests of the local community, was bound to stir resentment. Given its size alone, Denmark proper was unlikely to have anything equivalent to the deeply entrenched centrifugal tendencies of Brittany in France or Catalonia in Spain.

[4] Robert Molesworth, *An account of Denmark as it was in the year 1692* (London, 1694), pp. 99–122, 232, and 246.

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Maritime communication to the more heavily populated parts of the kingdom was easy and relatively fast, whilst outlying possessions like the Faeroe Islands or Iceland rarely impinged on political stability at the centre. Norway and the duchies of Schleswig-Hostein were a different matter, and it is no coincidence that both of these areas, despite concessions of political autonomy, experienced more unrest than Denmark. But even the Lofthuus rebellion in Norway in 1786–7, whilst of sufficient scale to warrant military counter-measures, was triggered more by economic difficulties and by the abuses of inadequately supervised local administrators than by any 'national' resentment against a distant monarchy. Indeed the rebel leader, Christian Jensen Lofthuus, twice personally travelled to Copenhagen in the firm belief that the crown, once made aware of the real nature of local grievances, would act justly.[5]

An obvious strategy for stability in Denmark–Norway was, as in some central European states in the later seventeenth century (and Russia soon afterwards), through the integration of the social elite into a formalized service structure. This was not just a practical measure, but also an explicit signal (as in Sweden in 1680) that the time for unruly council aristocracies had passed. Although a new privy council was created on the succession of Christian V in 1670, its functions, like those of other state departments (colleges), were fairly clearly and narrowly defined. A new titular ranking system promulgated in 1671 and 1679 did not exclude members of the old aristocratic families, but attempted to encourage the formation of new bonds of loyalty to the crown amongst those who entered crown service either from within the kingdom, or more commonly from the north-German principalities and further afield. Those of highest rank were allocated considerable administrative and local supervisory powers, and a few years later their fiscal privileges on large entailed landed property were confirmed. At the same time, however, provision was also made for the ennoblement of commoners who attained high office. The meteoric rise of Frederik IV's personal secretary Peder Schumacher in the 1660s (formalized by Christian V with the grant of the title of count of Griffenfeld in 1671), followed by his equally spectacular fall from grace in 1676 (complete with trial for corruption, death penalty, and last-minute reprieve to life imprisonment), made it plain for all that status and power were now contingent on the crown's favour.

Naturally, the actual process of creating a new service elite was neither as simple nor as drastic as this last example might suggest. The old nobility retained some prominence, especially in provincial and local administration, and over the next century most of the high offices of state continued to be held by individuals with claim to various forms of personal and hereditary status either in the kingdom or in northern Germany. Perhaps because of relative

[5] This belief was clearly on the optimistic side, since a variety of real grievances in Norway persisted, notably over economic policy, and over the lack of University and banking facilities: see O. Feldbæk, 'For Norge, kjæmpers Fødeland: norsk kritik og identitet, 1770–1773', *Historisk Tidskrift* (*Oslo*), 73 (1994), pp. 23–48. For a short account in English of the Lofthuus rebellion, see H. A. Barton, *Scandinavia in the revolutionary era, 1760–1815* (Minneapolis, 1986), pp. 149–54.

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economic backwardness, the Danish eighteenth-century elite seemed, by the standards of, for example, contemporary France, relatively homogeneous in terms of its social and political outlook. Corporate identities were slow to evolve at any level in society, and, partly because of the overtly absolute power of the crown, appeared more directly dependent on central authority than in western Europe.

Even the legal profession in Denmark–Norway failed to acquire anything remotely comparable to the self-consciousness of, for example, the French nobility of the robe. Until 1736, when Copenhagen University established its first full degree programme in law, training for the law was necessarily practical and ad hoc, particularly for those who could not afford to travel abroad. This was not necessarily a loss to society as a whole: contemporary satires against the legal profession abound, and the comprehensive law code of 1683 had been specifically designed to be accessible to the layman. Thus the long-established network of local courts could continue to function under the supervisory role of the higher courts of appeal – with as little 'professionalization' by lawyers as possible. But how well this worked in practice is open to debate. The reports resulting from an official inquiry in 1686 suggest that some lower court officers were decidedly unfit: in Jutland, for example, forty-four out of eighty-two presiding officers were deemed incompetent – one was described as being 'extraordinarily malicious and ignorant, favouring those parties who offer him the greatest [material] consideration, and even allowing litigants to draft the wording of the judgment they want pronounced'.[6]

We noted earlier how Molesworth in 1694 singled out the judicial system as an exception to his otherwise very critical evaluations of Danish absolutism. Such assessments are necessarily relative, and perhaps by European standards he was right. But it is also clear that the growing role of noble or ennobled landowners as local administrators and supervisory agents of the crown during the eighteenth century concentrated power in the hands of a narrow social group, blurring any functional distinctions between the public administrator and the private landowner – and in the process strengthening those assumptions of benevolent paternalism and deferential social conservatism which so conveniently coincided with the interests of the crown. In such an environment, even if the personnel of the law courts had been of a more uniformly high standard, any hope of fair and open access to the law for all members of society was bound to be utopian.[7] By mid-century, Henrik Stampe, the most distinguished legal mind in Denmark, and chief legal adviser to the crown from 1753 to 1784, tackled Montesquieu's recommendation for the separation of

[6] The documentation resulting from the 1686 inquiry is in Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen: Danske Kancelli, C30. See also M. Lebech, 'Jyllands gamle Retskredse', *Jyske Samlinger*, 5RII (1935–6), pp. 151–344.

[7] B. Løgstrup, *Jorddrot og offentlig administrator* (Copenhagen, 1983), especially pp. 24–61, emphasizes the extent of the overlap between the private and the public functions exercised by landowners, for example with regard to tenancy contracts (private property) as against military conscription (public obligation); see also L. Dombernowsky, *Lensbesidderen som amtmand* (Copenhagen, 1983), pp. 31–48, 60–2 and passim.

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legislative, executive, and judicial powers in the state by arguing that the crown's voluntary self-restraint in effect secured the separation of the latter two.[8] For most practical purposes, this may have been a reasonable argument as far as central government is concerned. At local level, however, the law was undeniably subject to strong administrative–seigneurial domination; and the judiciary, like the rest of Danish society, remained the obedient servants of a theoretically unchallenged state.

The historian searching for independent corporate identities elsewhere in Danish society will again largely look in vain. Guilds and municipal corporations lacked economic weight – the only potential exceptions being those of Copenhagen, which were under the close scrutiny of the crown. As one would expect in a Lutheran state, the clergy were not in any position to take an independent line either, and by mid-eighteenth century the Danish–Norwegian crown could, also uniquely in Europe, look back on two centuries free of any significant religious/ideological dissent. From the 1680s, there were some officially recognized nonconformist communities, including Huguenots and Jews; there were probably also, following a Copenhagen dispensation of 1693, some networks of Roman Catholics, but they were of no importance. Essentially the Lutheran church remained unchallenged in Denmark, Norway, and the duchies – its growing Pietist orientation helping, especially in the reign of the rather austere and self-conscious Christian VI (1730–46), to give the monarchy a powerful ready-made and at least superficially uniform ideological backbone.

The myth of a benevolent and just king in harmony with his subjects – promoted already in 1660 and implied in the 'contractual' terminology of parts of the Royal Law of 1665 – was sustained with some degree of success through the eighteenth century. In contrast to the formality of the French court, the court in Copenhagen made a virtue of openness: from 1725 anyone was entitled to submit written petitions or statements at one of the weekly occasions where the king would be personally present, and the king could also be approached more informally, for example while he was riding. This access was meant to serve both as a useful check on corruption and venality in the administration, and also, in the right hands, as a powerful public relations gesture. Frederik IV (1699–1730) had a real gift for putting at ease those who availed themselves of the opportunity to speak to him in this way. The tradition of an accessible monarch did not work so well for Frederik V (1746–66), as he gradually eroded his credibility in an alcoholic haze. The progressive dementia (probably schizophrenia) of Christian VII (1766–1808) made total nonsense not only of approachability but indeed of absolutism itself; but the basic idea of an attentive monarchy was (as we shall see) revived when the crown prince

[8] Stampe was not alone in adopting such a pragmatic view, and many subsequent Danish commentators followed suit. This was entirely in line with the selective reading of Montesquieu also common in Germany at the time: see F. Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the enlightenment: Scottish civic discourse in eighteenth-century Germany* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 81ff. German thinkers were in any case widely read and influential in Danish intellectual and government circles.

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took charge of his father's government in 1784 and created the conditions for ministerial stability through the revolutionary period.

The Danish–Norwegian crown was thus an effective focal point for the relatively uncomplicated society that it governed. Moreover, all the evidence suggests that at least until around 1770 it succeeded in maintaining a consensus amongst the vast majority of those who mattered. Admittedly, this may not appear a great achievement, if Molesworth and Jaucourt were right – that is, if the very basis of Danish absolutism was a complete denial of any rights of participation or consultation for any subjects. But in reality, of course, no early modern state was without its 'political nation'. Members of the eighteenth-century elite, whether sprung from old noble families or benefiting from the post-1660 opportunities for titular status or promotion through service to the crown, exercised influence through various means: not only, as we have seen, in the upper echelons of local administration, but also as office holders in the collegiate central administration, as members of the court entourage, or, for the select few, as members of the small privy council. What this meant in practice varied from reign to reign. Whilst Christian VI had jealousy guarded his authority, to the extent of being reluctant to delegate even trivial matters, Frederik V on the other hand allowed nearly all his authority to be exercised through a small circle headed by his life-long confidant Adam Gottlob Moltke. Moltke was not on the privy council, but served for the entire reign as *overhofmarkskal* (equivalent to lord chamberlain). In that capacity he could control access to the king, and through close and daily personal collaboration with Frederik he was in effect first minister until the king's death.

Power and influence within the system thus depended in the first instance on some sort of access to the king, or, failing that, connections at court or in the bureaucracy. But by mid-eighteenth century political awareness was spreading outwards. Ludvig Holberg, professor at Copenhagen University from 1717 until his death in 1754, had through his historical and fictional writings helped to create a livelier environment amongst the staff and students there. At the socially exclusive Sorø Academy, where staff had a measured freedom of expression through self-regulation, teachers like Jens S. Sneedorf and Andreas Schytte, whilst remaining strictly loyal to the regime and steering clear of sensitive political issues, encouraged discussion of Montesquieu, as well as of physiocratic and cameralist thinking. But whether originality was ever allowed to prevail over caution is difficult for the historian to judge: until 1770 tight pre-publication censorship ensured that debate in print was curtailed. Only on particular occasions, such as the prize-essay competition for the king's birthday celebrations in 1755 – on how to 'maintain the prosperity of the land' – was active debate on agrarian and economic issues encouraged.[9]

One issue, however, triggered increasing discussion within the Danish–Norwegian monarchy: that of 'national' identity. The monarchy, much like

[9] There is a very extensive literature on aspects of Danish technical agrarian development, but for a recent radically innovatory and broad perspective, see T. Kjærgaard, *The Danish Revolution: an ecohistorical interpretation* (Cambridge, 1995).

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the Habsburg empire, was utterly dependent on the maintenance of a cosmopolitan tolerance, where loyalty and service to the crown were the sole criteria for 'citizenship'. There was a long tradition of intermingling of Germans and Danes in the elite, and Norwegians (like Holberg) who wanted to make a career naturally gravitated towards Copenhagen to join that circle. The German language was widely used in central government, and so widely understood in society at large that at least until the 1770s it caused little comment in the capital or in those areas of, for example, rural Jutland, where colonies of Germans had settled.

Just how vital it was to maintain this tolerant co-existence becomes obvious if we look at the state as represented in the first census, that of 1769. It indicates that for every three Danes and three Norwegians there were two German-speaking subjects (in the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein), to which must be added a sprinkling of Icelanders, Greenlanders, and Faeroese, as well as those in the overseas colonial possessions in the Caribbean, Africa, and the east. The resulting economic structures were very diverse, ranging from the sparsely populated Norwegian coastal settlements to the rich and intensively cultivated Schleswig. Most of the population was rural, with only one significant urban concentration within the kingdom proper (Copenhagen, with a population of 70,000 according to the 1769 census). There were two major cities on the periphery, in the northern-German territories subject to the Danish crown: Altona with a population of 18,000, and Flensburg with 7,000.

In the light of this mixture, it is not surprising that the crown was anxious to emphasize loyalty to itself as the main unifying force. But not even a society on the periphery of enlightened debate could, in the age of Montesquieu and Herder, avoid serious discussion of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identities. Holberg himself had contributed to a growing awareness of Danish–Norwegian history and linguistic identity, and the foundation of learned societies (notably Videnskabernes Selskab in 1742) had diversified the debate. But in a composite state like Denmark–Norway, the issues were bound to be more than academic. For example, many of the great families serving the crown, including the Bernstorff family, Moltke, and others, were of at least partial north-German extraction. Naturally, they saw their 'homeland' as the place where they worked and served. Tyge Rothe in his widely cited publication of 1759, *Thoughts on love of the fatherland*, had strongly endorsed this point of view, defining the 'patria' not as the place where you are born, but rather where you reside and work, and defining the cultural and moral values of society in accordance with an hierarchical order stratified according to public function. In a stable and prosperous era, severe friction over such issues might have been avoided; but dynastic accident ensured that from the late 1760s political stability in the kingdom could no longer be taken for granted.

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II

The succession of Christian VII in 1766 created apparently insuperable contradictions within the system, destroying any pretence of normality. The king was soon recognized by those at court to be hopelessly unfit for power, his irreversible mental disorder making him incapable of exercising any political or personal judgement whatsoever. Whilst the royal European tour of 1768–9 came off as well as could be hoped, his rages of uncontrollable temper and violent energy soon became obvious even to Copenhageners at large. There could hardly be a clearer illustration of the fundamental flaw of hereditary absolutism. For a few years, the ministerial team inherited from the previous reign succeeded in keeping executive government together by means of the old privy council; but since the Royal Law itself provided no legal foundation for such an arrangement, factional power struggles were inevitable.

The precariousness of the whole edifice was made clear to all who cared to look in the early 1770s. As is well known, Struensee, a total outsider taken on as physician to the royal couple, exploited his crucial access to the only technically indisputable source of authority in order not just to gain the confidence of the demented king – or at least to acquire some skill in controlling his moods – but also to seize the political initiative. Struensee dismissed the privy council and created in its place a style of cabinet government managed by his own political creatures. This may have made practical sense, and certainly facilitated the implementation of his sweeping if in some respects half-baked German-style cameralist reform programme. But it also guaranteed the rapid convergence of different forms of resentment, ranging from the narrow anti-German feelings triggered by Struensee's failure to understand either the language or the traditions of the country he was governing, to the personal hostility of those members of the old elite, including Frederik V's advisers, who saw themselves removed from court.

Ironically, it was one of Struensee's own over-hasty reforms that allowed some of these resentments to spread – and in the process provided historians with the first clear evidence of the state of political consciousness in Copenhagen. On 14 September 1770 Struensee abolished, without qualification, all censorship of the press. The brief order to this effect, sent to the relevant ecclesiastical and secular authorities, simply stated that the intention was to foster rational discussion: 'It is as harmful for the impartial pursuit of truth, as it obstructs an enlightening of the misconceptions and prejudices of former generations, when honest minds keep silent out of considerations of social rank, government orders, or pre-conceived opinions.'

Such a measure was naturally greeted in enlightened Europe with enthusiasm – Voltaire, amongst others, asserting that is was an example for others to follow. But in fact the abolition of censorship released a flood of writings, many of which, published anonymously, played on the well-founded rumours of Struensee's sexual relationship with the queen, and on the abuse of power by a foreigner. Struensee was himself so put out by these that he imposed

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some belated restrictions in October 1771, insisting that the name of the publisher and the author be indicated on all publications. There can be no doubt, however, that this titillating phase in the history of the Danish press, whilst contributing little to any serious discussion of the nature of government and society, ensured that Struensee's fall in January 1772, and subsequent trial, was accompanied by a destructive and narrow anti-German and anti-reform backlash. A de facto regency was created under the supervision of the queen mother, and eventually headed by her uninspiring and thoroughly Danish protégé Guldberg. Though it barely had more political legitimacy than the Struensee regime, it did exploit the backlash effectively – most notably in implementing the 1776 law against the employment of foreigners in royal service[10] – and pandered to the narrower conservative instincts of the old elite by restoring the privy council and the noble-dominated service corps.

Curiously, the press reforms of Struensee were not repealed outright during the ensuing twelve-year regency. It is not difficult to see how a potentially damaging repeal could in fact be avoided. The Struensee interlude had not lasted long enough for any significant mature political debate to grow, and the Copenhagen publishing business was not large enough for individuals to be able to hide under a cloak of anonymity. So while the tragi-comic events of 1771–2 had resolved none of the underlying problems of the legality and location of governmental authority, few dared to probe any of these issues in print. Relying initially on the ambiguities of unspoken censorship, the new regime only gradually moved towards the effective suppression of all political comment. A supplementary order of 20 October 1773 reinforced the powers of the Copenhagen police (and later also the provincial authorities) to suppress all newspaper and journal discussion of domestic affairs of state, including 'misinformation' and personal gossip of a potentially political nature.[11]

Such reliance on Danish conservative and law-abiding habits, and on the

[10] Demands for the exclusion of foreigners from government offices had been voiced by writers like Eiler Hagerup already in 1767; indeed four years earlier Guldberg himself had, as professor at Sorø, criticized the prevalence of German at the court. The events of 1772, however, released much more bitter and often xenophobic frustrations, discussed more fully in *Dansk identitetshistorie*, ed. Ole Feldæk, vol. I (Copenhagen, 1991), pp. 111–230. Although the law of 1776 did not exclude German-speaking subjects who were born in those territories south of the border which were governed by the Danish ruling house, public opinion in Denmark was rapidly becoming highly sensitive to alleged German cultural and linguistic encroachment. The nationality issue again became contentious during the reforming ministry of 1784–97, and erupted in the brief so-called 'German feud' of 1789–90, discussed ibid. vol. II, pp. 9–109. See also the debate in *Historisk Tidsskrift* (Copenhagen, 1992), pp. 326–52; and in *Der dänische Gesamtstaat: Kopenhagen, Kiel, Altona*, ed. K. Bohnen and S. A. Jøgensen, Wolfenbütteler Studien zur Aufklärung, XVIII (Wolfenbüttel, 1992).

[11] The background documentation to the order of 20 Oct. 1773 (Rigsarkivet: Daske Kancelli, Koncepter og Indlæg til Sjællandske Tegnelser) suggests there was disagreement in government circles, as there had been immediately after the coup the previous year, whether the existing press legislation was sufficient or not. The order of 7 Oct. 1771 had in fact already been used for prosecutions – the most notable victim being the writer Christian Thura, whose series of disrespectful commentaries first on the Struensee legacy, then on the post-Struensee political and religious establishment, were deemed unacceptably subversive.

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cautious self-preservatory instincts of publishers, appears in the light of surviving periodicals and publications to have been fully justified. All comment on domestic political issues effectively disappeared.[12] The few newspapers that survived for any length of time did so largely because of their utterly uncontentious or even trivial contents. Thus the popular *Copenhagen Evening Post* (*Kiöbenhavns Aftenpost*), founded at Struensee's fall in 1772, survived on light entertainment, moral anecdotes, and low-level Copenhagen gossip. The widely used *Copenhagen Directory* (*Adresse Contoirs Efterretninger*) of 1759 relied on innocuous material regarding suppliers and business addresses, together with the eighteenth-century equivalent to advertisements; whilst the more general Copenhagen paper *Berlingske Kiöbenhavnske Tidender* of 1749, which still exists, survived by emphasizing foreign news, keeping as far as domestic matters were concerned to the safe ground of official proclamations and announcements.[13]

The effect of this self-censorship did not go unnoticed amongst the few independent observers of the period. Some twenty years ago, the Danish historian J. Møller brought to light a rarely studied radical tract by a contemporary and actual friend of Guldberg, the historian and writer Peter Frederik Suhm (1728–98). Immediately on the fall of Struensee, Suhm drew up a draft constitution for the kingdom. His aim was to replace the old absolutist royal law of 1665 with a parliamentary representative system. Although based on moderate principles, his proposals were deemed so radical that the text was left unpublished until after Suhm's death in 1799, and even then nearly got the publisher Rasmus Nyerup into deep trouble. But Suhm had not left it at that. In 1774, at the height of the conservative clamp-down, he drew up a rather less contentious set of *Rules of government*. In the hope of getting them through the press, he appended them to a small anonymous piece of political fiction, a kind of moral tale entitled *Euphron*. In the end, however, caution prevailed, and he adopted the characteristic *ancien régime* subterfuge of having the book published in two versions, one for general sale, without the appendix, the other for private distribution, complete with the *Rules*. Suhm's *Rules* do appear to have had a positive reception amongst select members of the elite, and were apparently even studied by the crown prince in the last year before the coup of 1784.

In fact Suhm's ability to continue his career suggests that some freedom of ideas still survived, provided an author did not court the public at large. Suhm's *Rules* were a quite remarkable early attempt at creating the blueprint for a bill of rights, including such basic principles as religious toleration, the equality of all before the law, the right of everyone to own property and land, and the desirability of open government without unnecessary secrecy. It also included a set of interesting fiscal and economic principles, partly physiocratic in origin, partly critical of past practices. Notable amongst these were the

[12] For the very few exceptions to this generalization, see H. Jørgensen, *Da censuren blev opgivet* (Copenhagen, 1970), pp. 53–68; though lacking references, it is largely based on the older discussion in E. Holm, *Danmark–Norges Historie*, v (Copenhagen, 1906), pp. 148–62.

[13] For a description of all journals and newspapers, their owners, frequency, duration, and orientation, see J. D. Søllinge and N. Thomsen, *De danske aviser, 1634–1989*, vol. 1: 1634–1847 (Odense, 1989).

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demand for free trade, and for progressive taxes rather than fixed-rate personal taxes – as well as the recommendation not to hoard tax revenues, since 'tax revenues are best looked after in the pockets of the state's subjects'. Of particular interest in the present context, Suhm also recommended that

> each person must have the freedom to think, speak and write what he wants: thereby kings will best find out the truth. Ministers are afraid of such freedom, for they fear enlightened kings, and do not wish petitions from the people to go straight to him, or via anyone other than themselves.

Here, in short, was a set of guidelines for a law-based free society, remarkable not only for the time of its publication, well before the American War of Independence had begun, but also for the fact that it took shape in such a closed environment. It is clear that the crown had neither the means nor the intention of suppressing scientific and intellectual debate so long as it remained abstract; but any practical discussion of the unprecedented current political predicament was totally out of the question. As Suhm himself admitted in a letter to a friend enclosing the uncut edition, 'we are and remain nonetheless, a race of slaves, and we have perhaps never been more abject slaves than now'.[14]

III

Had this regime remained in place – preserving the façade of a static absolutism on behalf of an irretrievably insane king – Suhm's pessimism might well have been regarded as a fitting postscript to Jaucourt's earlier judgement. With not even the letter of the Royal Law observed, Denmark–Norway was sliding into what at the time was recognized as 'despotism'. It is possible that the instinctive conservatism and political inertness which we have already observed would have helped avert serious unrest, at least until the troubled 1790s. In the event, however, a radically different solution was found.

At the first feasible opportunity, just after the confirmation of the sixteen-year-old crown prince Frederik, a small circle of the prince's confidants helped him stage a bloodless coup. On 14 April 1784, at the first meeting of the privy council he had ever attended, the prince secured his father's signature on a decree terminating the cabinet-style regency government that had evolved since 1772. Seemingly paralysed and unprepared, the regency bowed to the inevitable dismissal, and were spared any reprisals. No part of the Royal Law of 1665 provided any guidance in this context, but the fact that the crown prince now took personal control ensured that no one could dispute the legitimacy of what emerged.

From 1784, then, Denmark–Norway recovered the stability of a long-established political system, guaranteed by a king-in-waiting whose political instinct and sense of commitment helped to outweigh his inexperience. Remarkably by the standards of contemporary European politics, his team of cameralist-minded ministers headed by A. P. Bernstorff remained in place

[14] J. Møller, 'P. F. Suhms regeringsregler 1774', *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 12RVI (1972), pp. 123–55, esp. 125–9, 137.

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until 1797. For more than a decade they presided over a substantial but moderate reform programme covering agrarian relations, primary education, poor relief, workhouses, prisons and criminal punishment, banking, the economy, and the slave trade in the Danish colonies. Some of these initiatives encountered serious resistance or practical obstacles, and opponents of reform soon began to blame the ministerial team for misleading or misinforming the crown prince – though in reality this team was far from united amongst themselves. In particular, the nationality issue again burst into the open in 1789, in a bitter campaign against German linguistic and cultural influences. Orchestrated in part by opponents of the cosmopolitan and reformist elements at court, this nationalist backlash could have had significant repercussions had it developed beyond crude and emotional attempts to assert a Danish cultural identity. As it was, however, the government could safely allow the protagonists to exhaust themselves in heated and fruitless vituperation.[15]

Historians have for many years (notably in the 1950s, and again over the last decade) discussed the appropriateness of terms such as 'enlightened absolutism' and 'enlightened despotism' to describe many different ways of implementing reform in the later eighteenth century. Everyone now accepts that government-driven 'enlightened' reforms – in such areas as the liberalization of censorship practices and reduction of controls on the book trade, encouragement of religious toleration, reform of the judiciary, removal of economic regulation, and positive interference in peasant–seigneur relations – were all much more complex and ambivalent phenomena than was first supposed. That there were new influences and priorities at work within government in many parts of Europe has gained credibility from recent research. But there has also been much fruitful historical debate about the extent to which government initiatives both depended upon, and at times tried to exploit, some selective forms of 'public opinion' (enlightened or otherwise) – and indeed whether government reform was more often a response to outside pressures rather than to some kind of internal spontaneous renewal process.[16]

The Danish case is no exception in raising a daunting range of difficulties for the historian when it comes to establishing causal links, analysing the stages by which state policies were actually formulated, and identifying possible connections between what surviving records can tell us about real opinion in and out of government. As we would expect, the Danish–Norwegian crown continued to give priority to all matters affecting the preservation of the existing social order and the avoidance of internal confrontation. Yet, whilst still playing the useful card of obedience to a nominally absolutist state, the

[15] See n. 10, above.

[16] The comparative European debate needs no further comment here: for a lively recent contribution, see D. Beales, 'Was Joseph II an enlightened despot', in R. Robertson and E. Timms, eds., *The Austrian enlightenment and its aftermath* (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 1–21. On the specifically Scandinavian dimension to this debate, see J. A. Seip, 'Teorien om det opinionsstyrte enevelde', *Historisk Tidskrift* (Oslo), 38 (1958–9), pp. 397–463; and the more recent rejection of parts of this argument by H. Horstbøll, 'Enevælde, opinion og opposition', *Historie*, 17 (1987), pp. 35–53.

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crown began to tolerate, and eventually even encourage, public discussion of a kind that had never occurred before.

What this could lead to in practice is particularly clear in connection with the well-known rural reform programme. The fact that technical agrarian improvement (introduction of new crops and of more complex rotation systems, voluntary dispersal and enclosure of holdings formerly in strip-field or common cultivation, better security of long-term tenure) had been progressing steadily since the 1760s, both on crown and on private estates, meant that the potential economic benefits for all concerned could by now hardly be doubted. But more controversial issues – like the question of labour services and the demoralizing effects of mobility restraints (*stavnsbånd*) on male peasants – were also raised in the 1760s, and had even resulted in some legislative efforts during the Struensee interlude. The use of a routine administrative inquiry to justify the wide remit of the rural reform commission of 1786 was thus not a bolt out of the blue.

The series of recommendations formulated by the commission during the next years, and the careful compromises that secured durable implementation, have been analysed in depth by generations of Danish historians.[17] The high profile which the commission was allowed to maintain until 1789, the fact that its membership included representatives of divergent landowning interests, that its secretary was the skilled and abrasive lawyer Christian Colbiörnsen, and that its resolutions were at key junctures given the ostentatious backing of the crown prince, all suggest that this was regarded at the time as a central and difficult issue. The stir that the reforms caused was evident to all by 1788, when two members of the exclusive royal privy council took the unprecedented step of resigning from the council in protest against key legislation. Two years later, the spectacular confrontation in print between Colbiörnsen and the leading conservative landowner Luttichau – not to mention the supreme court libel case between them in 1791, during which Colbiörnsen, still the chief legal adviser to the crown, effectively represented the state – was evidence enough that the crown could when necessary be a true and unapologetic practitioner of enlightened authoritarianism. In the process, however, the whole reform programme became a public issue, encouraged directly by the unprecedented decision of the rural reform commission itself in 1788 to publish the full and detailed minutes of its own meetings, and thus become an active participant in public debate. The terms on which that public debate was conducted suggest that domestic perceptions of Danish absolutism had matured significantly since the 1760s.

In what sense are we entitled to use the phrase 'public debate' in this context? As we shall see, the controversies surrounding rural reform clearly stirred a large number of provincial landowners, and, more strikingly, by 1789

[17] Barton, *Scandinavia in the revolutionary era*, pp. 127–230, provides a good survey in English, with an extensive bibliography. For a summary of the actual work of the rural reform commission, and of other reform policies implemented by the 1784 regime, see T. Munck, 'The Danish reformers', in H. M. Scott, ed., *Enlightened absolutism* (London, 1990), pp. 245–63.

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also part of the peasantry themselves. Yet it is worth emphasizing that, with regard to most of the other issues thrown up by the events of 1784, the tone and agenda of public discussion outside actual government circles was effectively determined by Copenhagen, and in particular by its educated and informed elite. Even in the capital, the growth of a freer public opinion after the creation of the new regime in 1784 was not immediate. Indeed the most striking feature revealed by a scan of the Copenhagen press is the prevalence of extreme caution. Whilst from hindsight the palace coup of 1784 seems, in the context of the problems of Christian VII's reign, an obvious turning point in the direction of stability and political resolution, contemporary opinion was much less certain. The new government itself gave no initial hint of any liberalization of the system. The existing ambiguous press laws were not clarified. An order of 9 April 1785 instructed the Copenhagen police authority to call together the printers and confirm to them that they would be held responsible, under penalty of a fine, for what they printed.

In fact intellectual life in Copenhagen was still limited. It is significant that, despite substantial re-organization and curricular change in the University in 1788, the normal languages of instruction remained Latin, French, and German. Public lectures in Danish did occur, but were exceptional, and Danish as a subject was not taught properly until after 1809. Like many French and English universities, that in Copenhagen was slow to address contemporary issues. More fruitful were the many clubs and societies that had sprung up in the capital from the 1770s onwards, starting with the Norwegian Society of 1772 and Dreyers Club of 1775, and proliferating in the later 1780s with the Danish and Norwegian Society of 1785, the Burgher Society of 1785/7, and a number of other more or less formal groups. A police order of 1780 had imposed some official restraints on organizations of this kind, but most of them in any case had membership restrictions, fees, and a formal constitution which helped preserve their image of fashionable respectability. A few, like Dreyers Club, also evolved as literary clubs with their own broadly based library and journal subscriptions, making them a forum for discussion and enlightened debate which fed into the more innovative press of the later 1780s.

After years of minimal change, the press developed significantly. Seven new papers were launched in Copenhagen between 1785 and 1790, and sixteen (some fleeting) in the 1790s: as yet there were no dailies, mostly weeklies and biweeklies. As in pre-revolutionary France, pamphlets and flysheets often provided the best medium for more radical or critical ideas, and the press could tap into this debate by means of reviews and commentary. However, circulation figures suggest that demand, though growing, was still very small: pamphlets and literary works rarely sold 1,000 copies, and most newspapers and periodicals survived initially on subscriptions lists of a few hundred, with only gradual penetration into provincial Denmark and Norway.[18] The weekly

[18] As for the other parts of Europe, it is very difficult to establish the print-runs and types of readership of the Danish press. One attempt has been made by T. Kjærgaard, 'The rise of the press and public opinion in eighteenth-century Denmark–Norway', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 14

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Morning Post (*Morgen-Post*), founded in 1786, was probably not unusual in 1788 in struggling to survive with just 350 subscribers, despite aiming at a market of 'the uneducated, women, children, and the lowest class of the reading public'.[19]

Amongst the new journals, *Minerva*, founded in 1785, was the most impressive and erudite. It was edited and owned by two younger writers, Christian H. Pram (1756–1821) and Knud Lyhne Rahbek (1760–1830). Amongst its early contributors were some of the ablest writers and teachers of the period, including once again Suhm, the radical author Peter Andreas Heiberg (1758–1841), as well as Colbiörnsen himself. Its circulation was small, but its influence considerable: its second issue gives a list of 496 subscribers, with no less than forty-one copies going to various branches of the royal family, others to prominent statesmen and landowners as well as urban dignitaries. Appearing monthly, it carried not only literary reviews, theatre, and arts news, but also a section of foreign news and history, including, for example, detailed reporting of events in France before and after 1789. Significantly, in view of the nationalist fervour under Guldberg and the ban on domestic political news in force since 1773, this history/news section from the first issue covered Denmark alongside other European states, giving a brief synopsis of main developments. It thus reported work on the Kiel Canal, summarized bank and currency reforms being worked out for Schleswig-Holstein and for the kingdom itself, gave information on Danish overseas trade, reported on a fire in Christiania (now Oslo), and commented on the progress of technical agrarian reform. Even more remarkable was the mention in the first issue (July 1785, a full year before the main reform commission was actually established) of rumours of 'even more extensive operations for the furtherance of agrarian change, both on crown and on private estates. There is much well-informed discussion about this crucial matter.'[20] Obviously reflecting current debate amongst the elite, the October 1785 issue started a detailed historical narrative of Danish absolutism since 1660, and a discussion of changes in peasant–seigneur relations. The December issue carried a long article by the already well-known radical writer Christian Albrecht Fabricius, under the rather loaded title 'Whose constitution is the happiest: that of the Danish peasant-tenant, or that of the Mecklenburg serf?' – where he came to the conclusion that there was not much in it, as it all depended on how exploitative the seigneur was.[21] The

(1989), pp. 215–30. Using post-office distribution lists, he argues that by 1800 the total output of Danish-language papers had risen to around 10,000 copies, each of which might reasonably be seen by ten individuals, effectively giving 10% of the total population over the age of fifteen access to a paper of some kind. See also his much fuller but unpublished dissertation, 'En undersøgelse af den offentlige kritik af den danske Enevælde, 1789–1799' (Copenhagen University, 1973; available in The Royal Library in Copenhagen).

[19] Cited in *Kiöbenhavnske Lærde Efterretninger* (1788), pp. 79ff and 202.

[20] *Minerva: eet maanedskrift*, 1 (July 1785), p. 108. The way fascicles of this journal are numbered (and hence bound in different libraries) is not consistent: the references given here are to the set in the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

[21] Ibid. pp. 239–304.

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question of freedom of the press itself came up for constructive debate in the journal in the following spring (1786). The establishment of the rural reform commission was also duly announced later that year, with a reprint of its official instructions.

Although the reporting was not entirely one-sided, *Minerva* was clear in its liberal sympathies. During the spring of 1787, when the rural reform commission was working through some of the most controversial aspects, the journal was dedicated to that determined protagonist of state intervention, Colbiörnsen himself. Later it carried a brief report of demonstrations in Copenhagen in July 1787. During the autumn it made references to the growing expectation of more initiatives from the reform commission, and proudly publicized the grant of new hereditary leases to crown tenants in northern Zealand in August 1788. There was even a brief mention of the unusual progressive income tax imposed in March 1789 to help pay for the short war against Sweden. Such comment would have been unthinkable before 1784, and the journal evidently had the protection of the liberal reformers in government.

Successful publishers were no doubt as aware then, as they are now, of the need to respond to the interests of their readers in order to survive; but they also had to understand the bounds of what was commercially and politically safe. Newspapers and books are thus inevitably an imperfect reflection of 'public opinion' even amongst the educated elite. That said, the eighteenth-century press provides an almost inexhaustible resource even in the more peripheral areas of enlightened Europe. For Copenhagen, as for many other parts of later eighteenth-century Europe, systematic content analysis of the press is still in its infancy. Arguably, we should not rely too heavily on *Minerva*, closely linked as it was to liberal government circles: a sampling of views in the broader and more accessible Copenhagen press is indispensable.

A useful guide to the interests of the general reading public may well be the long-established cultural and literary review founded in 1720 by Wielandt and taken over in 1748 by the Berling publishing house, which despite varying titles is best known as the *Copenhagen Learned Review* (*Kiöbenhavnske Lærde Efterretninger*). This weekly did not carry much news as such, concentrating instead on what appears to be a fairly systematic reviewing of new publications, both Danish and foreign (mostly German and French). Already in 1767 it had nearly 500 regular subscribers across a quite wide social spectrum (including some in the provinces, and a few in Norway and Iceland). It adopted an explicitly broad editorial policy and a pragmatic approach clearly intended to appeal to all habitual readers.[22]

[22] *Kiöbenhavnske Lærde Efterretninger*, originally known as *Nye Tichender om lærde sager*, later as *Nyeste Kiobenhavnske Efterretninger* or just *Lærde Efterretninger* (henceforth abbreviated *KLE*): founded in 1720 and published continuously from 1722 to 1810. Despite its variable title, its format and content remained remarkably consistent, making it ideally suited for systematic content analysis. For the period covered here it was paginated consecutively through a whole calendar year, covering all fifty-two fascicles, which could thus be bound into a substantial octavo-size book. Although the number of pages per fascicle remained absolutely constant at sixteen, slight weekly

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What is clear from systematic study of this journal through the 1780s and early 1790s is that the range as well as the tone of the debate reflected in the *Learned Review* changed slowly but significantly from 1784. The tone both in reviews and editorials became more outspoken, with instances of overtly bitter and inflammatory writing which suggest both a slight relaxation of fears of state regulation, and also an increasing public awareness of the profound divisiveness of the issues concerned. On the fundamental issue of peasant–seigneur relations, the journal was on the whole more sympathetic to reformers than to conservative views, but gave serious attention for example to the case for total deregulation, as argued by some landowners. It had less sympathy with those who failed to see anything wrong in the existing order. Already in 1784 the journal took to task a conservative landowner (probably Fr. von Buchwaldt) for railing against the Copenhagen intelligentsia and its 'disease of legislation-mania'.[23] Even a new book by the veteran author Tyge Rothe, which spoke admiringly of English agrarian developments and advocated the usefulness of physiocratic land policies, was praised for its good intentions but criticized for failing to stress the need for clearer intervention.[24] Yet the *Learned Review* itself was not always happy about the direction of discussion, and evidently fell foul of several authors on both sides of the debate.

The paper reached what must surely have been a watershed, in terms of its perception of the politics of the day, when in the autumn of 1786 it reviewed the first publication by a member of the rural reform commission itself – a detailed background paper by one of the government's top legal advisers, the procurator-general Oluf Bang. As we know from the minutes of the commission, Bang's text was one of the starting points of the whole legislative reform programme; but the fact that his text was also simultaneously published alerted the public for the first time to the direction in which the crown was moving. Two aspects of the review are noteworthy. One was that the reviewer, in obvious contrast to the usual policy, studiously avoided making any judgements about the text itself, suggesting that it would be improper to comment on the work of crown officials. Instead, he merely welcomed the fact that the government was making its discussions available immediately in print.[25]

The second interesting feature was that the *Learned Review* used the occasion to launch a systematic review of the unfolding debate. The journal justified this unprecedented serial review, which in the end ran to no less than sixty-seven

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variations in the total length of text could be accommodated by means of changes in the size of print.

[23] *KLE* (1784), pp. 710–12.

[24] Discussed in a serial review covering consecutive issues, *KLE* (1784), pp. 369–444.

[25] *KLE* (1786), pp. 673–9. The promised full publication of the rural reform commission proceedings began only in 1788, when the first stage was complete, and was terminated in 1789 with the publication of a second volume, dealing with the drafting of the ordinance abolishing the *stavnsbånd*. The further proceedings of the commission up to its termination in 1816 were not reported fully to the public.

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books and pamphlets, by emphasizing (late in January 1787) the overarching importance for the kingdom of a cautious but satisfactory solution of the problems concerned. The editors hesitantly stressed that 'how such change is implemented, and at what stage the peasant can be granted full freedom like other citizens, is really a matter for the Commission to decide',[26] but they also hoped that constructive debate would be furthered by their own policy of reviewing publications in the order in which they appeared, and by juxtaposing one against the other to illumine any new ideas being raised. Many of the resulting reviews were quite full, up to ten pages or more in length for works that raised major new arguments. Since in fact most of the items reviewed did make explicit reference to Oluf Bang's original work, it is perhaps not too fanciful to regard the books themselves, and the reviews in this journal, as indicators of the first high-level public debate in Denmark actually concurrent with the work of a government commission itself – a kind of proxy consultation by the crown of the political (or at least reading) nation.

At the end of this series, late in 1787, when the first legislation had already been put into operation, the *Learned Review* noted after its last review that it would use

> the silence which has now descended to terminate the review of this literary battle, the most important that has ever taken place in Denmark. It may not fully prove to later generations that enlightenment, philosophic spirit, liberal thinking and genuine search for freedom prevailed widely amongst us; … yet it will surely consolidate the truth for everyone with an open mind, that what is unjust can never be useful, and whoever bases his advantage on the exploitation of others will end up punishing himself.[27]

It would be hard to find a clearer statement of what an enlightened and rational society might ultimately hope to achieve. Perhaps this cautious optimism was what the editor knew his readers would like to see; but, compared with Suhm's pessimism of 1774, this optimism seemed justifiable in terms of the very existence of a reading public which was now beginning to use its freedom – if not to debate government policy itself, then at least to discuss the context from which it arose.

Over the next few years, many such issues were indeed debated in the leading Copenhagen papers. The older *Copenhagen Directory* (*Adresse Contoirs Efterretninger* or *Adresseavisen*), which by 1785 had secured a circulation of over 2,000, continued to build its success on advertisements, personal inserts, and ephemera, but added an increasing variety of other material including news and topical stories. While its comments on current affairs remained superficial, it can be regarded as a middle-rank paper, bridging the gap between the educated elite and a broader public. Those who preferred just gossip and trivia could turn to the successful *Copenhagen Evening Post* (*Kiöbenhavns Aftenpost*). Meanwhile, the *Learned Review* continued to raise current affairs indirectly, via reviews of recently published work – discussing issues ranging from reform of the University, ways of remedying poverty, and efforts to improve public

[26] *KLE* (1787), pp. 54ff.

[27] *KLE* (1787), p. 585.

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health, to an enthusiasm typical of the age, the design of new national costumes. Characteristically, it welcomed several factual government-sanctioned publications, including a new collection of statistical data issued in 1790. Here, the reviewer stressed that government officials were coming to recognize that, although their only explicit duty was to serve the king, they could also now, unlike ten years earlier, serve the public by allowing access to reliable information.[28]

Rather ominously, however, freedom of the press itself became the object of more intense discussion from 1790. As elsewhere in Europe, initial reactions to the upheavals in France had in liberal circles been sympathetic and positive, but the journal *Minerva* adopted an increasingly worried tone already when it reported the French decrees of August 1789 and the concomitant rural violence. Food rioting elsewhere in Europe was greeted with equal alarm, and the editor described as a 'calumny' the suggestion that *Minerva*, by its reporting of such events, was itself encouraging similar unrest at home.[29] The *Learned Review* confronted underlying fears more directly by reporting the attempt by the French national assembly to curtail unauthorized and subversive publications.[30]

For the moment, despite the growing boldness of some Copenhagen authors and satirical cartoonists, and corresponding expressions of alarm by some members of the elite, action was taken against only two publications. The official entry of the crown prince and his bride into Copenhagen in 1790 was the occasion for many panegyrics, but also for a few satirical pieces from younger writers criticizing the existing social and political order. The only one of any substance was a pamphlet by Niels Ditlev Riegels, which, in calling for a Danish estates general based on the pre-1660 tradition and on the French example, complete with financial accountability, was deemed so unacceptable as to deserve exemplary suppression.[31] Far more ephemeral, and typical of the

[28] Review of F. Thaarup, *Kort Veiledning til det danske Monarchies Statistik* (Copenhagen, 1790), in *KLE* (1790), pp. 529–38. By this stage the systematic collection of statistical information by the government followed well-established procedures, ranging from full censuses to assessments of educational needs, but Thaarup's volume was the first compendium of such information for public use. It included census, trade, and financial aggregates, a summary overview of the central administration itself, and much else.

[29] *Minerva*, fasc. 17 (July–Sept. 1789), pp. 417–27, and fasc. 18 (Oct.–Dec. 1789), pp. 271ff and 414–27. Because of food shortages in 1789, there were real fears of popular unrest of a kind familiar from other parts of Europe. In fact *Minerva* consistently took a remarkably factual and scrupulously sober line in its reporting of domestic and foreign affairs. The same applies to most of the other periodical publications of the time. Even the brief and unwanted war against Sweden (1788–9) gave rise to surprisingly little jingoism – the satirists and cartoonists merely demonising Gustavus III – whilst everyone from the finance minister down (with the possible exception of the crown prince himself) seemed to urge its hasty termination in order to limit its damaging fiscal consequences. See B. Blüdnikow, *Sladder og satire: Københavnerliv i 1780erne* (Copenhagen, 1988), pp. 36–41 and 142–61.

[30] A full report in *KLE* (1790), pp. 399ff, names Marat, Desmoulins, and Prudhomme, but noted that official prosecution was authorized only for the former.

[31] N. D. Riegels (1755–1802), *Julemæker fra Landet og Byen* (Copenhagen, 1790). Since the pamphlet was published anonymously, the publisher, having refused to name the author, was in accordance with the law fined 200 *rigsdaler*.

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crudeness of much contemporary satire, was an anti-aristocratic text penned by Heiberg and published in the hitherto struggling general paper, the *Morning Post* (*Morgen-Post*). In this case, it has been suggested, a prosecution was made only because of the over-zealous Copenhagen police authorities, and the resulting fine was shared by the author and the printer. Neither Riegels nor Heiberg, however, suffered any further penalties for the time being, and both remained prominent in Copenhagen literary circles.

Since no one followed Riegel's lead, and since imitations of Heiberg's relatively insignificant piece were unmemorable, the government decided against imposing any general restrictions. The only new instructions, an order of 3 December 1790, was if anything a helpful clarification: it gave the law courts a more prominent role than the police authorities in actual prosecutions. Technically, the decree of 1771 remained in force, complete with its convenient ambiguities.[32]

The shrewdness of such an approach was obvious, especially in the light of the government's simultaneous handling of a crisis triggered by a petition from 103 Jutland landowners against the whole rural reform programme.[33] There are two aspects of this most decisive confrontation which are relevant in the present context. First of all, the fact that Colbiörnsen, now himself procurator-general, published in full the text of what had been intended as a confidential petition, suggests that he had (correctly) predicted that the case made by the Jutland landowners would in itself be perceived by the reading public as a damning indictment of their factional self-interest. No less significant, however, was the fact that he added a parallel text which demolished the whole aristocratic case in a tone that few newspaper editors or Copenhagen intellectuals would have dared at the time. In this he certainly, as a partisan of radical reform, won the vociferous if predictable approval of both *Minerva* and the *Learned Review*, approval that he may genuinely have wanted at this critical and potentially dangerous political juncture. In theory, however, appeals for public support were redundant: according to Colbiörnsen's argument, the crown was bound invariably and instinctively to speak for the nation. No conflict of interest was perceived in such a stance – indeed there could in absolutist theory be none, for the crown and its subjects (even if the latter were now overtly politically conscious) were always supposed to be inseparably

[32] The background documentation to the order of 3 Dec. 1790 has been missing for some years, so it is currently not possible to verify precisely how and why the government reached its decision. However, *KLE* (1790) discussed both offending publications, pp. 753–7 and 778–82, and was prepared to acknowledge that Riegels, in particular, had some substantive arguments.

[33] The Jutland petition was couched in terms which emphasized the extent to which the agrarian reforms were destabilizing the countryside, and damaging seigneurial property rights in breach of the law code of 1683. See Barton, *Scandinavia in the revolutionary era*, pp. 187ff, and, for a fuller discussion, C. Bjørn, 'Den jyske proprietærfejde, 1790–91, *Historie*, 13 (1979), pp. 1–70. The petition triggered a new wave of writings and polemics regarding the reform programme and its social implications, which were again reviewed in *KLE* (1791), pp. 113ff. Characteristically, the Jutland protest also triggered a symbolic gesture of support for the reforms, in the shape of a monument to the unity of interest between the crown and its subjects, financed by public subscription and built from 1792: see K. Kryger, *Frihedsstøtten* (Copenhagen, 1986).

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joined in a common interest. Radicals like Riegels and Heiberg merely provided a useful counterbalance against die-hard traditionalists like the Jutland landowners. By striking at both, the crown could reinforce its image as the true defender of the interests of the whole, against factional and irresponsible minorities who, by their very action, had lost the right of participation.

Viewed in this light, it may well not have seemed incongruous that the government on one hand was using the medium of print to disarm the Jutland landowners, whilst on the other it was simultaneously marking out the limits of acceptable press debate by branding two Copenhagen publications as subversive. Loyalty to the monarchy, and to the political and ideological principles on which it was built, were both required and expected. Anyone who questioned such loyalty in ways liable to disturb the peace had de facto overstepped the boundary of acceptable public debate. As in the other monarchies of Europe, it was not necessarily the message itself, but its presentation and impact, that mattered.

At least until 1793, most authors and printers seem to have recognized as much. *Minerva* did continue to print some controversial material, including even an essay doubting the value of retaining noble privilege itself.[34] But its coverage of domestic political confrontations was often brief and schematic, much more so than, for example, its summary of events in France. The *Learned Review*, since it did not habitually comment directly on current affairs, could maintain its usual editorial policies unchanged. A few radical papers were launched, notably the monthly republican *Political and Physical Journal* (*Politisk og Physisk Magazin*) of 1793, which included extensive reporting of speeches by Tom Paine, Marat, and others. Since it concentrated on ostensibly factual reporting of events in France, it was allowed to continue. Malthe Bruun's republican democratic paper *The Waker* (*Vækkeren*) of 1794 was less fortunate: it was banned after three issues because it was deemed to have contributed directly to the substantial carpenter journeymen's strike in Copenhagen in July and August of that year.[35]

In the mid-1790s, however, there was still room for moderate public discussion of key social and political concerns. Bruun launched further radical papers in the next few years, but his strongly worded assault on both the establishment and the church, in the pamphlet *The catechism of the aristocrats* of 1796, predictably led to formal complaints and forced Bruun temporarily into hiding. Crown Prince Frederik himself, already notorious for his enthusiasm for all things military, and as incapable as most contemporary rulers of understanding that a desire for constitutional reform or representative government was not necessarily tantamount to treason, showed diminishing

[34] *Minerva*, fasc. 21 (July–Sept. 1790), pp. 11–52.

[35] The fairly mild and sporadic riots that did occur in the 1790s were triggered by very specific factors (including economic uncertainty), and rarely had political targets beyond the Copenhagen magistracy: for this dimension, see B. Blüdnikow, 'Folkelig uro i København 1789–1820', *Fortid og Nutid*, 33 (1986), pp. 1–54.

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patience for such writings. The response to M. G. Birckner's book *On the freedom of the press and its laws*, published in 1797, was characteristic: the government soon made clear that it was not prepared to countenance its own civil servants taking active part in an uninhibited public debate, but nothing was done to stop several reprintings of the work itself. Birckner criticized the limitations of current press freedoms and the arbitrary nature of current prosecutions, while arguing convincingly that total freedom of the press would genuinely strengthen the monarchy.

Following Bernstorff's death in June 1797, however, a full-scale re-assessment of press freedom was undertaken. Partly in response to pressure from the British and especially Russian governments, a new definitive press law was implemented in 1799. By European standards this was a fairly modest piece of legislation, but it did define a number of politically sensitive areas which were henceforth deemed out of bounds in terms of newspaper coverage. Colbiörnsen, who had a hand in drafting the simplified final version of the law, insisted that, whilst 'subversive and irresponsible writings' needed to be eliminated, it was essential to maintain the principle of freedom of expression, defined within an equitable system of law applicable to all.[36] Most contemporaries probably accepted that restrictions were long overdue. But for Bruun and Heiberg it meant the end of the road: each of them was prosecuted, in part on the basis of what they had published before the new press law had been implemented. The exile of Heiberg in 1799 may have been understandable, given his increasingly inflammatory attacks on government policies. But when Bruun suffered a similar sentence the following year, Denmark arguably lost a more significant political commentator. Henceforth, newspaper reporting of domestic affairs became very muted.

IV

So where did Denmark stand, by the 1790s, in relation to the grim warnings of Molesworth, Jaucourt, and Suhm? It will be clear that the Danish–Norwegian monarchy was built on a number of assumptions, some of which were quite fragile. But it will also be apparent from the evidence of the growing debate after 1784 that there were good reasons why the government could afford to take a long-term view. For a start, from the present discussion it will be apparent that confrontational or factional politics had no place in the thinking either of the Danish crown or of the vast majority of its educated subjects. Some of the government's reforms of the late 1780s and early 1790s were controversial; and, at a more personal level, the political clientage system operated by Bernstorff and his ministerial colleagues was at times open to criticism. Yet most of those who engaged in public debate recognized –

[36] The documentation on the press law is found in Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen: Danske Kancelli F37, Bilag til Forordning ang. Trykkefrihedens Grænser 27 sept. 1799, Sjællandske Registre, no. 1089. E. Holm, *Danmark–Norges Historie 1720–1815*, vol. VI/2 (Copenhagen, 1909), pp. 121–219 and 660–703, still provides the standard account of the circumstances that led to this legislation.

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especially as a result of the Jutland protest of 1790 – that without this ministerial team the very continuation of moderate reform might well be in jeopardy.

As elsewhere in Europe, most of the politically alert public in Copenhagen soon turned against the kind of radical innovation being attempted in France after 1791. In the absence of any representative assembly, detailed reporting of domestic politics was totally dependent on ministerial goodwill. The few voices that might suggest otherwise either failed to become viable, or were silenced. Because the traditionalists in Danish society never achieved coherence as an effective pressure group, and because genuine radicals were too volatile and few in number to carry any weight, the quite generous bounds of freedom of expression could be left essentially unaltered for longer than in the rest of Europe.

In short, the crown remained firmly and indisputably in control – if anything strengthened by its showdown with the Jutland petitioners, by its persistence with the gradual and broadly consensus-based reform programme, and by its own qualified openness. Public opinion was unsophisticated and mostly supportive: many commentators, whilst continuing to take a lively interest in developments in France, seemed unanimous in their condemnation of even modest signs of unrest or upheaval at home. Copenhagen was not Philadelphia, let alone the arcades of the Palais Royal in Paris. The crown had ensured internal stability for a very long time, and was from 1784 – perhaps precisely because of the exceptional circumstances created by a dynastic fluke – demonstrably capable of moving with enlightened times. Measured by the modest expectations of the active public in Copenhagen, what more could be wanted?

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