

The Newcastle Chronicle
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[*Editorial*]

The escape of the six most distinguished Communist¹ prisoners from New Caledonia has created a sensation in this colony rarely felt; but it is trifling when compared to what it must be in Paris, and throughout France – if not throughout all Europe. Men often escape in larger numbers from custody, and there is nothing thought about the matter. It is not an uncommon occurrence for prisoners to conceal themselves until the fit moment arrives when they can elude the vigilance of the guards, and get away, and nothing is thought about it afterwards. If the absconders are afterwards arrested, good and well; and if they get clean away, and are heard of no more, nobody cares one straw. It is not so, however, in this case, because the men who are now enjoying the protection of British law represent principles which may be regarded as either suppressed or in the ascendant, just as may be seen in the circumstances of the leaders that uphold them. It is this reflection that gives rise to the excitement which their escape from captivity has produced. It is not so much what these men have done, but what they will yet be able to accomplish in the political struggles that are now taking place in France, that causes the excitement.

The history of the third Revolution is not yet written; there are several events awaiting the pen of the future historian to depict. At least, this is evident from the conduct of these men, on their arrival at this port from New Caledonia. They earnestly desired that the fact of their escape should be communicated, by Reuter's telegrams, to Europe. They have the fullest confidence that, while a large proportion of the population in Paris, and throughout France, would hail the event with frantic delight, the Government, and those to whom they were formerly political opponents, will be in a state of consternation not easily described, and they feel anxious to learn how the news of their escape will be received – not that they have any doubt as to the effect the intelligence will produce, but that they may have some compensation for their captivity in the alarm which their escape will produce among their enemies. Now, this expectation on their part seems to be justified, from the funds supplied to enable them to escape, and to enable them to travel on such a scale of respectability. To us, it appears as if the Government of France would be more likely to hail with satisfaction the escape of these men, if their designs have a tendency to loosen the bonds of society, and as the well disposed through the French nation would then be disposed to rally round the Government, in support of law and order, and influence those who are anxious to maintain the Republic to forego much of the freedom they are desirous of obtaining, rather than have the industry of the country once more paralysed by internal disorder. It is impossible, at this distance, to say what the state of public feeling is in France. It is a strange country, and the politics of its public men are still stranger. What direction the feelings of the people are taking during the calm that has prevailed during the past year, it is difficult for Englishmen to conjecture. But we rather suspect the sections with whom Rochefort and his companions are in league have been very busy, and their dispersion, on the taking of Paris by the troops sent to overthrow the Commune, has tended to disseminate the views of that party throughout the nation; and such is the fickleness of the people in that country, that the side which appeared to display most intellectual activity is the one the crowd will follow.

We cannot wonder at the present state of things there. From the time of Francis I, the rulers of that country have never scrupled to violate their most solemn engagements, and those

who followed the overthrow of the Bourbons were, without exception, as perfidious as any that were before them. It was this distrust, this want of confidence in those that held the reins of Government during the period of the first revolution that led to the terrible acts that characterised that Reign of Terror. Napoleon the 1st violated his oath to the nation and every treaty with the other European Powers that stood in the way of his ambition. Charles X, who made such promises about toleration to the British Government, showed himself as faithless as his ancestors. His successor, Louis Phillippe [*sic*], after he appeared established on the throne, astonished Europe by his intrigues in reference to the Spanish marriage, by which he sought to disturb the balance of power in Europe, and gratify the ambition of his family. Then we have his successor, Louis Napoleon, who shamefully violated his oath to maintain the Constitution under which he was elected President. On being accused of entertaining a design of acting the same part as his uncle, he said to the assembled deputation, “You, who made the Constitution, can unmake it or amend it; but as for me, the oath I have taken obliges me to support it unimpaired.” The *coup d’etat* of the 2nd December 1851, showed how the elect of France observed that oath. Again, when his Government was overthrown, in 1873², while himself lay a prisoner in the hands of the Prussians, M. Thiers was placed at the head of affairs, and the course he pursued was one well calculated to excite suspicion, not only among the Parisians that placed him at the head of the nation, but even Europe felt some doubt as to the course he was about to take. Hence the setting up of the Commune, which, for ought we know, may or may not be as perfidious a crew as ever existed. There is, however, one man who, whatever his errors may be, will not stoop to dissimulation, in order to gratify his long-cherished desire. We allude to the Comte de Chambord³. But his supporters are not so scrupulous. If there be any dissatisfaction with him, it is because he will not dissemble.

The instability of the French people is owing to the absence of high principle that has influenced the people of Great Britain and Germany for the last 300 years. England had its revolutions, but they were entirely owing to the perfidious dispositions of the two monarchs under whom they took place; and these would probably have acted very differently had they not been influenced at the time by the French Court. But the people, being guided by sentiments very different from those that obtained in France, knew how to use their power and secured a settled Constitution, which is the envy of the world, and places her first among the nations. The French are a noble people – chivalrous, intellectual and brave – but we fear there is no repose for the nation until those principles which have ever been cherished by Englishmen and which have made England what it is, be embraced by the French people, as the guide of their social and political conduct.

NOTES

1. The term “Communist” is, of course, to be understood in a different sense from that which it was to take on in the 20th century, i.e. as a reference to persons of Marxist political persuasion. In fact, the Commune’s “government” consisted of a number of different factions, ranging from the so-called Jacobins, who followed in the French Revolutionary tradition of 1793 and wanted the Commune to control the Revolution; to the Proudhonists, socialists who supported a federation of communes throughout the country; and the Blanquistes, socialists who demanded violent action. The program that the Commune adopted, despite its internal divisions, called for measures reminiscent of 1793 (end of support for religion, use of the Revolutionary calendar) and a limited number of social measures (10-hour workday, end of work at night for bakers). [Source, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*]

2. The Government of Napoléon III (i.e. the Second Empire) was in fact overthrown in 1870, as an outcome of the Franco-Prussian War. He himself died in 1873.

3. The comte de Chambord (1820-1883), posthumous son of the duc de Berry, was a possible pretender to the throne of France, and had already taken the name Henri V in 1843. He represented the “legitimist” cause, as against the “Orléanist” cause represented by the comte de Paris (1838-1894). Why the *Newcastle Chronicle* favoured Chambord is not known.