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FRIENDS OF THE PEOPLE.

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*Freemason's Tavern, Saturday, May 31, 1794.*

*At a General Meeting of the Society of the Friends of the People, associated for the purpose of obtaining a Parliamentary Reform, held this day,*

CHARLES STURT, Esq. M. P. in  
the Chair.

The following Address to the People of Great Britain was agreed to, and ordered to be published.

AS the season approaches, when the Meetings of this Society are annually discontinued till the winter, we think it our duty, in the present extraordinary conjuncture, to vindicate our past conduct, and to declare the principles upon which we mean to proceed.

When we originally formed our association, and distinguished ourselves by the title of "The Friends of the People," we did not mean, (as has been often basely insinuated,) to divide the interests of our Countrymen, and to sow the seeds of jealousy and discord between the higher and the lower orders of society. Devoted, on the contrary, to the principles, and therefore careful of the forms of our invaluable Constitution, (FOR WHICH WE APPEAL TO OUR ORIGINAL DECLARATION, AND TO ALL OUR SUBSEQUENT PUBLICATIONS,) we sought to support every order of the State in equal purity and vigour; and to ensure the universal freedom and happiness of the Nation, by preserving those gradations of society, which, in some mode or other, are inseparable from civil life.

Previous to the time of our association, we thought we had observed, among considerable numbers of the people, a disposition to condemn, and an earnest desire to correct those acknowledged abuses in the actual Administration of our Government, which have arisen from the increasing influence of the Crown, and the unequal Representation of the Commons in Parliament.—To these causes we imputed the

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the establishment of a system, which has loaded us with an enormous debt, which has produced the necessity of a corresponding revenue, and given birth to a code of summary laws, inconvenient to the enjoyment of private life, and dangerous, in their progressive extension, to the Liberty of the Country—A system to which we owe the fatal attempt to subjugate North America, and the Revolution which finally separated her from Great Britain—an event, which we cannot but consider as the real source and origin of the calamities of the present time. We considered that that Revolution had produced, and was producing the most extraordinary changes in the world, and had afforded to mankind a striking confirmation of this great and invariable truth; that the affection and submission of a people to their Government, arising from a sense and experience of the blessings of liberty and order, are the only real securities of any political institution.

We had seen the sudden overthrow of the ancient and powerful Monarchy of France by the force of opinion, when the People, irritated by a long course of suffering, were, by the refusal of timely redress, driven, at last, to extremity and despair:—We had seen, and were in the daily course of seeing with affliction, the dreadful consequences of a sudden Revolution, upon whatever principles, or from whatever causes. We sought, therefore, (mistakenly perhaps, but honestly and conscientiously,) to avert from our country, by such means as appeared to us to be safe and effectual, the calamities inseparable from such convulsions. At a moment, when a spirit of liberty was seeking by untried ways to invent Constitutions, we invited our countrymen to look back to their own; to restore and to cherish it; conceiving it to be highly improbable, that the contagion of revolution could reach this Island, as long as the true principles and securities of our own genuine Government, in spirit and in substance, as well as in its forms, should be preserved to the People. We impute the greater number of the publications, which, (*so long unnoticed by Government,*) have at length been prosecuted as libels upon authority, and the Meetings of every denomination, which have been held up as dangerous to its sanctions, to one cause. We believe, that their authors and supporters, in general, are not unfriendly to the British Constitution, but discontented at what they feel to be a manifest departure from its principles; and we attribute much of that spirit, by which his Majesty's Ministers profess to have been alarmed, to their own conduct in resorting to harsh and coercive measures, instead of shewing a disposition to attend to just complaints and to correct real abuses.

Without vindicating this spirit in its excesses, or having promoted it by our example, we see no cure for it but by endeavouring to remove its causes. We think, that to change opinion by coercive laws, or to prevent it from shewing itself, in the end, in corresponding conduct is impossible; and we are therefore convinced, that while Parliament continues unreformed, and determined, at all hazards, to resist every Petition for Reformation, an alienation of affection from Parliament itself,

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itself, and from the Magistracies of the country, will spread and increase among the people; and that, though the English government may continue by a severe exertion of its authority to support its establishment, it can neither render to the people the mild protection, which is due to them, nor receive the happy return of their confidence and affection. On the other hand, we believe, that a substantial Reform, in the Representation of the People, which, without disturbing the forms of legislation, might secure the peaceful removal of abuses, would, at this calamitous moment, diffuse a spirit of affection and zeal throughout the country for its Government; administer in the practical enjoyment of its various advantages, the most powerful antidote to innovation, and exhibit a striking contrast to the anarchy which prevails in France. This was the object of our association. We wished, and we still wish to see the People of England assembled by affection and concord round the standard of their own Constitution, instead of being seduced by artifice, or impelled by terror, to become at once the blind instruments and the victims of those, whose interest it may be to promote internal dissention, and to render liberty itself unpopular to Englishmen, by railing at the crimes or errors of a mighty nation, over which they have no jurisdiction, and whose dangerous enmity they wantonly and foolishly provoke, at the risk of the very being of our country.

Such were the reflections which originally produced, and which determine us to continue our Association. And, in distinguishing ourselves by the title of "The Friends of the People," we meant, and still mean, the People in its amplest, happiest, and most harmonious sense, considering a Nation in all its various classes, distinguished in their order, but united and inseparable in their mutual Interests and Relations, as constituting A PEOPLE.

Unfortunately, as we think, for this Country, (for we despise the Calumny we have *personally* suffered,) this Association found no credit with his Majesty's Ministers, nor of course with the numbers whom they can influence, either for these intentions, or the consequences we looked to from our Institution. A system, indeed, the reverse of ours, has been pursued—a system, on which, as far as it has been recognized by Law, we make no other remarks, than such as we have the authority of Government itself for making, viz, That danger to authority has not been lessened;—that confidence in, and affection for Magistrates have not been re-established, but that, on the contrary, (according at least to those in Power), practices of the most dangerous tendency, have lately been pursued with "increased activity and boldness;" and that the country, instead of contentedly rejoicing in the blessings of our happy Constitution, cannot be kept any longer in subjection by the ordinary course of the laws; but, that in the midst of a calamitous and hopeless war, waged, as it is said, to preserve the forms of that Government which we love, from violence and destruction,

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the Legislature has been obliged to dissolve, or suspend for a long season, the most essential part of its substance and security.

We are sensible, that as a voluntary society of private men, we possess no means of serving our country, but in proportion to the confidence which our countrymen may think due to us—It is not, therefore, from ostentation, nor even in justice to calumniated integrity, but to give effect to the public cause, that we thus review our past conduct in the presence of the public, and pledge ourselves for the future; happy in the reflection, that though attacked and calumniated on the one hand by the enemies to Reform supported by the authority and influence of Government, and wounded occasionally on the other by the jealousy of those who may have considered our reserve and moderation as a proof of weakness or insincerity, we have yet held one even, firm, uniform, and unabating course; a course in which we are resolved to persevere, as long as perseverance shall offer us any prospect of success.