

PRESERVING THE
MONARCHY

The comte de Vergennes, 1774-1787

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Introduction

Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes, was one of the great foreign ministers of the eighteenth century, and this aspect of his career has been much studied by historians. Yet his diplomatic career is only part of the story. For most of the 1780s Vergennes was also virtually a first minister: in embryo between 1781 and 1783, and supreme from February to November 1783. At the end of that year he was almost hounded from office, but was politically resurgent from 1785 until his death early in 1787. Vergennes' domestic role is a fascinating subject in itself. The fact that his *ministériat* coincided with such a crucial period of European history, however, provides insights into a wider and even more compelling theme: that of the French monarchy at the moment of its fall.

The part Vergennes played outside foreign affairs has largely been forgotten. This is partly attributable to the character of the man himself. Vergennes was a master of self-effacement whose chief expertise lay in covering his tracks: it has been all too easy to overlook what a contemporary once termed 'le crédit caché de cet obscur ministre'. In addition, post-1920s historiographical trends have shifted attention away from the high politics of the late eighteenth century towards its social and economic aspects. The result has been a remarkable contrast between the early 1900s, which saw the publication of many important works and sources on the late *ancien régime*, and more recent years. A trickle of biographies of individual ministers has continued, but there has been little attempt to use these to present a coherent picture of the reign of Louis XVI as a whole. The period from 1774 to 1789 has usually been viewed as a mere prelude to the inevitable Revolution: the links between the Revolution and the political and personal divisions within the royal government in its last years have remained largely unexplored. The neglect of Vergennes is just one aspect of

the wider neglect of the background and assumptions against which he operated.

A further consequence of these trends has been to leave untapped a great many archival sources, both in private and public hands. The writing of this book has been helped enormously by access to Vergennes' private papers, now in the hands of his descendants, the Tugny Vergennes family. These contain not only important exchanges between Vergennes, his clients, and his ministerial colleagues, but, most significantly, 171 letters – most of which remain unpublished – to Vergennes from Louis XVI. When put together with Vergennes' own letters to Louis in the Archives Nationales, these form the most complete political correspondence of the reign, all that remains of the vast mass of almost daily communications between the king and his favourite minister. Much of this is published here for the first time.

The major public archives, too, have yielded important information about Vergennes and his policies. The Joly de Fleury collection in the Bibliothèque Nationale and the d'Ormesson papers in the Archives Nationales, predominantly used in the past for works on the *parlements* and individual families, contain a surprising amount about the ministerial and financial politics of the 1770s and 1780s. From all these sources it is possible to reconstruct the world of Louis XVI's council and court.

The aim of this book is to place Vergennes and his career in their political and historical perspective. In particular, it studies him in the context of the decisive debate that gathered momentum from the 1770s onwards about the nature and future of the French monarchy. Vergennes entered the ministry during the great political turmoil caused by chancellor Maupeou's remodelling of the sovereign courts or *parlements*. This act, whose importance has recently been underlined by historians, dealt a major blow to the constitutional consensus on which the absolute monarchy rested.

The chancellor's actions had two long-term effects. At court the conflict they created was perpetuated by the queen's increasingly high profile and her protection of Maupeou's enemy and the *parlements'* defender, the duc de Choiseul. Most important, although one of Louis XVI's first acts was to recall the exiled *parlements*, attacks on the royal authority simply shifted from denouncing the crown's repression of the *parlements* to the internal workings of the

government itself. 'Ministerial despotism' henceforth became the principal target of reformers, and calls for its elimination set an agenda to which successive royal ministers, including Vergennes, felt obliged to respond.

Vergennes had solutions of his own to the problems facing the French crown after 1774, which he attempted to put into practice in the 1780s. He was a friend and had been a client of Maupeou, and like the chancellor he was essentially concerned to preserve the absolute monarchy. Paradoxically, he tried to increase the royal authority by curbing ministerial despotism, particularly in the financial sphere. Conciliar control of finance was Vergennes' panacea for the French monarchy, bolstering public confidence in government by reviving that age-old symbol of the king's justice, the council. Although the *comité des finances* he set up collapsed within a year, its establishment is testimony to Vergennes' serious desire to reform the structures of the *ancien régime*.

Despite these efforts, the story of Vergennes is ultimately one of failure, not just of one man but of the system he served. By his death in 1787, France was witnessing the approaching end, not of monarchy *per se*, but of absolute monarchy. The timing of Vergennes' passing was in fact singularly appropriate: he had been brought up to believe in one particular ethos of government, and he would not have made the transition to a different one.

This book does not attempt to offer a detailed explanation of the structure of government or the rules of the political game at Versailles, except where this is absolutely necessary to the text. To have done otherwise would have been to write a more general history of the reign of Louis XVI. The actual functions of Bourbon government are ably described in depth elsewhere, particularly in Michel Antoine's *Louis XV* and John Hardman's *Louis XVI*. The central focus here is on Vergennes, and it is he who gives this book its *point de réunion*.

Vergennes is in no sense a modern figure. He disliked and opposed the forces that ultimately overthrew the French monarchy and have since gone on to shape present-day politics and society. He is only intelligible as the product of an earlier period, that of the *grand siècle*, which saw the apogee of the political system to which he devoted his life. Vergennes' career offers precious insights into the nature of this system, its strengths and its fatal flaws. It is in this context that

Vergennes finds his place, not in the company of the men of the Revolution, nor even the restored Bourbons, but in that of the statesmen of earlier generations: Richelieu, Mazarin, and Fleury. This is entirely fitting, for Vergennes was the last great minister of the *ancien régime*.