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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

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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

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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*.

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## CHAPTER I

*Recalled to life*

Some time in late June 1774, Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes, ambassador of the court of Versailles to that of Sweden, was sitting in his study in Stockholm reading a letter. This commonplace scene, however, marked the apogee of his career to date. The communication on his desk was from the young Louis XVI, who had just ascended the throne following the death of his grandfather Louis XV the previous month. Setting a pattern for all the new king's future correspondence, it was short and to the point:

The duc d'Aiguillon having resigned from his posts, the good that I hear spoken of you from all sides, as well as your diplomatic skill, has led me to choose you to replace him in the department of foreign affairs. Therefore come as soon as you can: in taking your leave you should present my compliments to the king of Sweden. It will give me great pleasure to see you.

Louis.<sup>1</sup>

It was a surprising twist of fortune that had brought Vergennes to this pinnacle. Just four years earlier, he had been in virtual disgrace, abruptly recalled after thirteen years as ambassador to Constantinople<sup>2</sup> after a disagreement with the then foreign minister, the duc de Choiseul. Now, after an intervening three years of risky but successful diplomacy at Stockholm,<sup>3</sup> he stood in the same position as the minister who had tried to end his career. The circumstances of Vergennes' early disgrace crystallised his political viewpoint at a critical juncture and had repercussions that went well beyond the moment of his rehabilitation. The recall from Constantinople

<sup>1</sup> Louis XVI to Vergennes, 5 June 1774. AFV, *lettres de Louis XVI*.

<sup>2</sup> The best treatment of Vergennes' period at Constantinople is L. Bonneville de Marsagny, *Le chevalier de Vergennes, son ambassade à Constantinople* (2 vols., Paris, 1894).

<sup>3</sup> On Vergennes' embassy to Stockholm, see again L. Bonneville de Marsagny, *Le comte de Vergennes, son ambassade en Suède* (Paris, 1898).

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marked the first time that Vergennes' personal career coincided with the wider concerns of the age around him. In forcing him into the only political position open to him after his disgrace, it shaped his views on the future of the French monarchy itself.

The essential problem had always lain in Vergennes' difficult relations with his chief, Choiseul. Etienne-François, duc de Choiseul,<sup>4</sup> was a *grand seigneur* of military background, a peer of France and a member of the highest circles of court and government. As such, he was bound to be disdainful of many aspects of Vergennes' origins. Born at Dijon in 1719, Vergennes was indeed noble: but his nobility was of the *robe* variety, of recent date, and lowly status.<sup>5</sup> His great-grandfather had been an *avocat* at the *parlement* of Dijon, his father was *président* of the *chambre des comptes* of Burgundy, and he himself had originally been destined for the law.<sup>6</sup> Vergennes was never allowed to forget this humble background in a diplomatic service dominated by the high aristocracy. The Austrian chancellor, prince Kaunitz, remarked in 1781 that 'the law court is visible everywhere in his actions and even in his writings'.<sup>7</sup> At this level, the antagonism between Vergennes and Choiseul was simply another aspect of the uneasy division of the French nobility into *robe* and *épée*.

The background to Vergennes' entry into diplomacy was also unlikely to appeal to a great aristocrat like Choiseul. The *éminence grise* of his early career had been his uncle à la *mode de Bretagne*, Théodore Chevalignard de Chavigny, who first employed him as a *conseiller d'ambassade* on his embassy to Portugal in 1739.<sup>8</sup> Chavigny was an experienced and respected diplomat, client of cardinal Dubois and the maréchal de Belle-Isle,<sup>9</sup> and minister at Hanover,

<sup>4</sup> No complete biography of Choiseul has yet been written, largely due to the difficulty of access to his private papers. For his early career, however, there is volume 1 of R. Butler's projected complete life, *Choiseul*, vol. 1, *Father and son (1719-54)* (Oxford, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> See Bernard Chevalignard, 'Les racines bourgignonnes de Charles Gravier de Vergennes', *Revue d'histoire diplomatique*, 3-4 (1987), pp. 191-213, and notes by Bernard Faÿ in the Vergennes family archives.

<sup>6</sup> See Orville T. Murphy, *Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes: French diplomacy in the age of revolution, 1719-1787* (State University of New York Press, 1982), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Kaunitz to Mercy, 8 February 1781, in comte F.-C. de Mercy-Argenteau, *Correspondance secrète du comte de Mercy-Argenteau avec l'empereur Joseph II et le prince de Kaunitz*, ed. A. d'Arnth and J. Flammermont (2 vols., Paris, 1889-91), vol. 1, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> See M.-A. Guyot, 'Portugal et Allemagne', in the catalogue of the Vergennes exhibition at the Musée de la Seine, Paris (1987), *Vergennes et la politique étrangère de la France à la veille de la Révolution*, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> See J.-F. Labourdette, *Vergennes* (Paris, 1990), pp. 18-19.

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Ratisbon, Lisbon, and finally Soleure. Yet his origins were surrounded by scandal. Son of a *rôtureur* mayor of Beaune, he had falsely assumed the noble suffix of de Chavigny and had himself presented at court. Forced to flee France when his imposture was discovered, Chavigny had only managed to regain court favour through organising a highly efficient spy-network during the negotiations for the Treaty of Utrecht.<sup>10</sup> Despite his subsequent distinguished record, Chavigny's shady reputation always dogged his nephew's career. As late as the 1780s it was still providing ammunition for Vergennes' enemies.<sup>11</sup>

These relatively humble antecedents, coupled with his uncle's reputation, played a great part in shaping Vergennes' character. To the end of his life he was marked by his early struggle to establish himself in diplomacy and live down his equivocal background. The knowledge that his career was not buttressed by membership of a great noble family accounts for his punishing appetite for work, frequent anxiety-provoked illnesses, and perennial worries about his political position. Vergennes' rather *bourgeois* air certainly made him the target of snobbery at court: even his virtues, such as devotion to his family, were denigrated. Yet Vergennes' detractors fatally misjudged him. The modest provincial veneer hid an immensely shrewd and subtle political operator who, despite a barrage of disingenuous protestations to the contrary, was a master of court intrigue.

Ostensibly, Vergennes was recalled from Constantinople as a result of his reluctance to obey Choiseul's demands that he encourage Turkey to declare war on Russia.<sup>12</sup> This policy, Vergennes felt privately, was ill-judged and bellicose. Yet there were other, more personal, reasons for the termination of his embassy. In the spring of 1767, Vergennes informed Choiseul that he had just married, without the king's permission, a certain Mme Testa, widow of a French doctor in Constantinople, who had been his mistress for several years and had already borne him two children. This was a genuine love-match, a remarkable display of passion on the part of a man later to be famous for his self-control. Choiseul was less than pleased by the news, and once again there was a social subtext to his disapproval, since Mme Testa was a *bourgeoise* of slightly uncertain

<sup>10</sup> Baron de Besenval, *Mémoires* ed. S. A. Berville and J. F. Barrière (2 vols., Paris, 1821), vol. II, pp. 1–6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* See also prince de Montbarey, *Mémoires* (3 vols., Paris, 1826–7), vol. II, pp. 113–14.

<sup>12</sup> See Murphy, *Vergennes*, pp. 151–61.

reputation.<sup>13</sup> Choiseul's reply to Vergennes was cold, and concluded on a withering note: 'You have forgotten, Monsieur, to inform me of your wife's name and rank.'<sup>14</sup>

Recalled to France on 22 April 1768, Vergennes languished unemployed in his native Burgundy until March 1771. A letter of his to Choiseul of February 1770 makes it clear that he returned in semi-disgrace:

If I have expressed to you the wish to continue my diplomatic career, this has only been in the hope that you would recognise and encourage it. You have replied, M. le duc, in a way that renders my hopes extremely slim and uncertain by saying that you would be very happy to find an opportunity to place my wishes before his majesty. This cold response on your part to a diplomat of thirty years' standing . . . who can justifiably boast of some success, leaves me in a state of confusion.<sup>15</sup>

At this difficult juncture, Vergennes' career took a momentous turn. Just when he seemed completely isolated and abandoned, he was rescued by a new protector, Choiseul's enemy the chancellor Maupeou. It was natural that Maupeou should protect Vergennes: both men shared a background and connections in the sovereign courts, particularly since Vergennes' elder brother was now *président* of the *chambre des comptes* at Dijon.<sup>16</sup> In addition, as a senior diplomat who had fallen out with Choiseul, Vergennes was a useful potential ally for the chancellor to use against his opponent. It is unclear when Vergennes first met Maupeou, but a link quickly formed. Certainly the tone of Vergennes' parting note to the chancellor before leaving Versailles in disgrace for Burgundy is very much that of client to patron:

I depart deeply moved by your kindness and by regret at having to leave, but this last feeling is tempered by my confidence that absence will not extinguish the goodwill that you have extended towards me. Please set a

<sup>13</sup> Choiseul is even reported to have spread a rumour at court that Mme Testa had originally been a slave, and had had children by her master. See J.-L. Soulavie, *Mémoires historiques et politiques du règne de Louis XVI* (6 vols., Paris, 1801), vol. II, p. 160 n. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Choiseul to Vergennes, 3 May 1767, AFV, *Correspondance politique et particulière*. Ministres de Louis XV.

<sup>15</sup> Vergennes to Choiseul, 8 February 1770. AFV, *Correspondance politique et particulière*. Ministres de Louis XV.

<sup>16</sup> Suggestive evidence of the close links between Vergennes' brother and Maupeou at the moment of the reform of the *parlements* is contained in the letters from the *présidente* de Vergennes to her cousin, the *présidente* de Meixmoron, especially those of 12 December 1771 and 5 January 1772, in *Quelques lettres de la marquise de Vergennes à sa cousine la présidente de Meixmoron (1771-1778)*, ed. J. Meurgey de Tupigny (Paris, 1956). As no copy of this work is



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final seal on this, Monseigneur, by confirming the promises you have made regarding my brother. Have no fear that your favours will make me ungrateful, my heart has always been loyal, the first feeling you inspired in it was that of friendship. Time has strengthened this bond, nothing can loosen it. The deepest attachment will always motivate the interest that I take in your prosperity and glory, which I hope will be as limitless as my good wishes.<sup>17</sup>

In choosing Maupeou as his patron, Vergennes chose well. In December 1770, the chancellor and his party managed to engineer the fall of Choiseul, and this victory led to the resumption of Vergennes' diplomatic career.<sup>18</sup> In March 1771, he was appointed ambassador to Sweden. His three years at Stockholm added considerably to his reputation. In August 1772 he played a prominent part in the *coup d'état* that humbled the pro-British senate and enabled the Francophile Gustavus III to create a virtually absolute monarchy.<sup>19</sup> The progress of his embassy was helped by the support and confidence of his new patron: a month before the *coup*, Maupeou wrote Vergennes a cordial note announcing that the king had promised him the next vacant place of *conseiller d'état*.<sup>20</sup>

In choosing Vergennes as his foreign minister in 1774, Louis XVI was not promoting an outsider. Whatever the other reasons for his appointment, Vergennes certainly had the backing of a powerful member of the government in the chancellor, and this support was probably decisive. The Austrian ambassador to Versailles, the comte de Mercy-Argenteau, thought that Vergennes was Maupeou's candidate for the foreign ministry,<sup>21</sup> and there is evidence that Vergennes thought so too. When, a month after his elevation to the ministry, he finally became a *conseiller d'état*, it was to Maupeou that Vergennes addressed his thanks.

I have just received, Monseigneur, the note with which you honoured me to accompany my letters of appointment as *conseiller d'état*. You lose no opportunity to give me proofs of your kindness: I myself shall lose none to

available in any major French or British library, I have had to rely on the transcript made of it by M. Bernard Faÿ, now in the Archives Vergennes.

<sup>17</sup> Vergennes to Maupeou, 10 March 1770. AFV, *Correspondance politique et particulière*. Ministres de Louis XV.

<sup>18</sup> See Labourdette, *Vergennes*, pp. 53–5.

<sup>19</sup> See Murphy, *Vergennes*, pp. 184–201.

<sup>20</sup> Maupeou to Vergennes, 5 July 1772. AFV, *Correspondance politique et particulière*. Ministres de Louis XV.

<sup>21</sup> Mercy-Argenteau, *Correspondance secrète . . . Joseph II*, vol. 1, p. 4.

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show you that my gratitude equals the sentiments with which I have the honour to be, Monseigneur, your most humble and obedient servant.<sup>22</sup>

Vergennes arrived back at Versailles as a self-effacing diplomat who had been absent from the domestic scene for over three years. Yet the country to which he was returning was in the throes of a political and constitutional crisis. This had been brewing for some time. The disasters of the Seven Years War had seriously compromised French foreign policy. In addition, throughout the course of the eighteenth century the monarchy's religious foundations had been subtly undermined by the twin forces of the Enlightenment and Jansenism.<sup>23</sup> Yet the most serious issue concerned the nature and limitations of the royal authority. Here matters had been brought to a head by Vergennes' own patron, Maupeou, with his unilateral abolition and remodelling of the sovereign law courts, the *parlements*, in January 1771.<sup>24</sup>

Maupeou's actions marked the culmination of almost thirty years of dispute over the precise extent of the royal power. In theory, the king of France was an absolute monarch, since he derived his powers from God and did not share them with any constitutional body like the English parliament. He alone, aided by his council, had the right to legislate, tax his subjects, make peace or declare war. Yet in practice the royal authority was much more circumscribed. The French monarch was 'a king to whom everything is possible but not everything is permitted':<sup>25</sup> a subtle network of limitations hedged his unfettered will and prevented him from acting in an arbitrary fashion. First came the moral sanction of accountability to God, preventing the king from acting in an unchristian way towards his subjects. Second came a more nebulous series of fundamental laws.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Vergennes to Maupeou, 24 July 1774. AFV, *Correspondance politique et particuliere*. Ministres de Louis XV.

<sup>23</sup> On Jansenism and its effect see D. Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the expulsion of the Jesuits from France 1757-1765* (Yale University Press, 1975) and *The Damiens affair and the unravelling of the ancien régime in France 1750-1770* (Princeton University Press, 1985). There is an enormous literature on the Enlightenment and its political effects, but for a general guide see D. Mornet, *Les origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française, 1715-87* (Paris, 1933).

<sup>24</sup> The two major works on the Maupeou *coup d'état* are J. Flammermont, *Le chancelier Maupeou et les parlements* (Paris, 1884) and D. Echeverria, *The Maupeou revolution* (Louisiana State University Press, 1985). See also W. Doyle, 'The parlements of France and the breakdown of the old régime, 1771-1788', *French Historical Studies*, 6 (1970), pp. 415-58.

<sup>25</sup> This quotation from chancellor Lamoignon is cited in M. Antoine, *Le conseil du roi sous le règne de Louis XV* (Geneva, 1970), p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 13-16.