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A manifestation from Lieutenant-Colonel John Lilburne, Mr William Walwyn, Mr Thomas Prince, and Mr Richard Overton (now prisoners in the Tower of London), and others, commonly (though unjustly) styled Levellers

Intended for their full vindication from the many aspersions cast upon them to render them odious to the world and unserviceable to the commonwealth. And to satisfy and ascertain all men whereunto all their motions and endeavours tend, and what is the ultimate scope of their engagement in the public affairs

They also that render evil for good, are our adversaries: because we follow the thing that good is.¹

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Since no man is born for himself only, but obliged by the laws of nature (which reaches all), of Christianity (which engages us as Christians), and of public society and government, to employ our endeavours for the advancement of a communitive³ happiness of equal concernment to others as ourselves, here have we (according to that measure of understanding God has dispensed unto us) laboured, with much weakness indeed but with integrity of heart, to produce out of the common calamities such a proportion of freedom and good to the nation as might somewhat compensate its many grievances and lasting sufferings. And although in doing thereof we have hitherto reaped only reproach and

¹ An imperfect rendition of Psalm 38: 20.

² End of title page.

³ communitive = common among a community.

hatred for our good-will, and been fain to wrestle with the violent passions of powers and principalities, yet since it is nothing so much as our blessed Master and his followers suffered before us and but what at first we reckoned upon, we cannot be thereby any whit dismayed in the performance of our duties, supported inwardly by the innocency and evenness of our consciences.

'Tis a very great unhappiness – we well know – to be always struggling and striving in the world, and does wholly keep us from the enjoyment of those contentments our several conditions reach unto. So that if we should consult only with ourselves and regard only our own ease, we should never interpose as we have done in behalf of the commonwealth. But when so much has been done for recovery of our liberties, and seeing God has so blessed that which has been done as thereby to clear the way and to afford an opportunity which these six hundred years⁴ has been desired but could never be attained – of making this a truly happy and wholly free nation – we think ourselves bound by the greatest obligations that may be to prevent the neglect of this opportunity and to hinder as much as lies in us that the blood which has been shed be not spilt like water upon the ground, nor that after the abundant calamities which have overspread all quarters of the land, the change be only notional, nominal, circumstantial, whilst the real burdens, grievances, and bondages be continued, even when the monarchy is changed into a republic.

We are no more concerned indeed than other men, and could bear the yoke we believe as easily as others; but since a common duty lies upon every man to be cautious and circumspect in behalf of his country, especially while the government thereof is settling, other men's neglect is so far we think from being a just motive to us of the like sloth and inanimadvertency⁵ as that it rather requires of us an increase of care and circumspection, which, if it produces not so good a settlement as ought to be, yet certainly it will prevent its being so bad as otherwise it would be if we should all only mind our particular callings and employments. So that although personally we may suffer, yet our solace is that the commonwealth is thereby some gainer, and we doubt not but that God in his due time will so clearly dispel the clouds of ignominy and obloquy which now surround us, by keeping

⁴ these six hundred years = since the Norman Conquest.

⁵ inanimadvertency = not giving due attention to.

our hearts upright and our spirits sincerely public, that every good man will give us the right hand of fellowship and be even sorry that they have been estranged and so hardly opinionated against us.

We question not but that in time the reason of such misprisions⁶ will appear to be in *their* eyes and not in *our* actions – in the false representation of things to them and improper glosses that are put upon everything we do or say. In our own behalves we have as yet said nothing, trusting that either shame and Christian duty would restrain men from making so bold with others' good name and reputation, or that the sincerity of our actions would evince the falsehood of these scandals and prevent the people's belief of them. But we have found that with too much greediness they suck in reports that tend to the discredit of others, and that our silence gives encouragement to bad rumours of us; so that in all places they are spread and industriously propagated, as well amongst them that know us as them that know us not – the first being fed with jealousies that there is more in our designs than appears: that there is something of danger in the bottom of our hearts not yet discovered, that we are driven on by others, that we are even discontented and irresolved, that nobody yet knows what we would have or where our desires will end; whilst they that know us not are made to believe any strange conceit of us: that we would level all men's estates, that we would have no distinction of orders and dignities amongst men, that we are indeed for no government, but a popular confusion; and then again that we have been agents for the king (and now for the queen); that we are atheists, antiscrripturists, Jesuits – and indeed anything that is hateful and of evil repute amongst men.

All which we could without observance pass over – remembering what is promised to be the portion of good men – were the damage only personal; but since the ends of such rumours are purposely to make us useless and unserviceable to the commonwealth, we are necessitated to open our breasts and show the world our insides, for removing of those scandals that lie upon us, and likewise for manifesting plainly and particularly what our desires are and in what we will centre and acquiesce: all which we shall present to public view and consideration, not pertinaciously or magisterially as concluding other men's judgements, but manifesting our own for our further vindication

⁶ misprisions = failures to appreciate value.

and for the procuring of a bond and lasting establishment for the commonwealth.

First then, it will be requisite that we express ourselves concerning levelling – for which we suppose is commonly meant an equality of men's estates, and taking away the proper right and title that every man has to what is his own. This as we have formerly declared against, particularly in our petition of 11 September,⁷ so do we again profess that to attempt an inducing the same is most injurious unless there did precede an universal assent thereunto from all and every one of the people. Nor do we, under favour, judge it within the power of a representative itself, because although their power is supreme, yet it is but deputative and of trust, and consequently must be restrained expressly or tacitly to some particular essentials as well to the people's safety and freedom as to the present government.

The community amongst the primitive Christians was voluntary, not coercive.⁸ They brought their goods and laid them at the apostles' feet. They were not enjoined to bring them: it was the effect of their charity and heavenly mindedness which the blessed apostles begot in them and not the injunction of any constitution, which, as it was but for a short time done (and in but two or three places) that the scripture makes mention of, so does the very doing of it there and the apostle's answer to him that detained a part, imply that it was not esteemed a duty but reckoned a voluntary act occasioned by the abundant measure of faith that was in those Christians and apostles.⁹

We profess therefore that we never had it in our thoughts to level men's estates, it being the utmost of our aim that the commonwealth be reduced to such a pass that every man may with as much security as may be enjoy his propriety.

We know very well that in all ages those men that engage themselves against tyranny and unjust and arbitrary proceedings in magistrates have suffered under such appellations – the people being purposely frightened from that which is good by insinuations of imaginary evil.

⁷ 1648. Printed as text above.

⁸ not coercive = not forced upon them by others.

⁹ Acts 4: 34–6; 5: 1–11. The story *actually* has Peter reprimanding Ananias and his wife Sapphira as lying to God in not giving to the church the full price of the land they had sold and in keeping some aside for themselves. Both died as a consequence of hearing of God's displeasure.

But, be it so, we must notwithstanding discharge our duties, which, being performed, the success is in God's hand to whose good pleasure we must leave the clearing of men's spirits, our only certainty being tranquillity of mind and peace of conscience.

For distinction of orders and dignities: we think them so far needful as they are animosities¹⁰ of virtue or requisite for the maintenance of the magistracy and government. We think they were never intended for the nourishment of ambition or subjugation of the people, but only to preserve the due respect and obedience in the people which is necessary for the better execution of the laws.

That we are for government and against popular confusion we conceive all our actions declare when rightly considered, our aim having been all along to reduce it as near as might be to perfection; and certainly we know very well the pravity¹¹ and corruption of man's heart is such that there could be no living without it, and that though tyranny is so excessively bad, yet of the two extremes, confusion is the worst. 'Tis somewhat a strange consequence to infer that because we have laboured so earnestly for a *good* government therefore we would have none at all, because we would have the *dead* and *exorbitant branches* pruned and better scions grafted therefore we would pluck the *tree* up by the roots. Yet thus have we been misconceived and misrepresented to the world, under which we must suffer till God sees it fitting in his good time to clear such harsh mistakes, by which many – even good men – keep a distance from us.

For those weak suppositions of some of us being agents for the king or queen, we think it needful to say no more but this: that though we have not been any way violent against the persons of them or their party (as having aimed at the conversion of all, and the destruction of none), yet do we verily believe that those principles and maxims of government which are most fundamentally opposite to the prerogative and the king's interest take their first rise and original from us – many whereof though at first startled at and disowned by those that professed the greatest opposition to him, have yet since been taken up by them and put in practice. And this we think is sufficient, though much more might be said to clear us from any agency for that party.

¹⁰ animosities = things that stir the spirit to virtue.

¹¹ pravity = perversity.

It is likewise suggested that we are acted by¹² others who have other ends than appear to us. We answer that that cannot be, since everything has its rise amongst ourselves, and since those things we bring to light cannot conduce to the ends of any but the public weal of the nation.

All our desires, petitions and papers are directly opposite to all corrupt interests; none have any credit with us but persons well known, and of certain abodes, and such as have given sound and undeniable testimonies of the truth of their affection to their country. Besides the things we promote are not good only in appearance but *sensibly* so: not moulded, not contrived by the subtle or politic principles of the world, but plainly produced and nakedly sent, without any insinuating arts, relying wholly upon the apparent and universal belief they carry in themselves. And that is it which convinces and engages us in the promotion thereof. So that that suggestion has not indeed any foundation in itself, but is purposely framed, as we conceive, to make us afraid one of another and to disable us in the promotion of those good things that tend to the freedom and happiness of the commonwealth.

For our being Jesuits, either in order or principles¹³ (as 'tis severally reported of us): though the easiest negative is hardly proved, yet we can say that those on whom the first is principally fixed are married and were never over sea – and we think marriage is never dispensed withal¹⁴ in that order, and that none can be admitted into the order but such as are personally present. 'Tis hard that we are put to express thus much; and haply we might better pass such reports over in silence, but that we believe the very mentioning of them publicly will be an answer to them and make such as foment them ashamed of such generally condemned ways of discrediting and blasting the reputation of other men. For the principles of Jesuits, we profess we know not what they are. But they are generally said to be full of craft and worldly policy, and therefore exceedingly different from that plainness and simplicity that is apparently visible in all our proceedings.

Whereas it's said we are atheists and antiscripturists, we profess that we believe there is one eternal and omnipotent God, the author and preserver of all things in the world, to whose will and directions,

¹² acted by = caused to act by others.

¹³ The point of calling them Jesuits was fundamentally to claim that they believed evil governors could be deposed, or assassinated, as well accusing them of the 'craft and worldly policy' mentioned later on.

¹⁴ never dispensed withal = the prohibition against marriage is never waived.

written first in our hearts and afterwards in his blessed word, we ought to square our actions and conversations.¹⁵ And though we are not so strict upon the formal and ceremonial part of His service – the method, manner, and personal injunction being not so clearly made out unto us, nor the necessary requisites which his officers and ministers ought to be furnished withal as yet appearing (to some of us) in any that pretend thereunto¹⁶ – yet for the manifestation of God's love in Christ, it is clearly assented unto by us; and the *practical and most real part of religion* is as readily submitted unto by us as being in our apprehensions the most eminent and the most excellent in the world, and as proceeding from no other but that God who is goodness itself. And we humbly desire His goodness daily more and more to conform our hearts to a willing and sincere obedience thereunto.

For our not being preferred to offices and places of profit and credit – which is urged to be the ground of our dissatisfaction – we say that although we know no reason why we should not be equally capable of them with other men, nor why our public affection should be any bar or hindrance thereunto, yet on the other side we suppose we can truly say of ourselves that we have not been so earnest and solicitous after them as others and that in the catalogue of suitors very few that are reckoned of us are to be found. We are very sorry that so general a change of officers is proposed,¹⁷ which we judge of no small disparagement to our cause; and do think it best that in removals of that kind, the ground should not be difference in opinion either in religious or civil matters, but corruption or breach of trust – considering the misery which befalls whole families upon such changes and that discontents are thereby increased: whereas we hold it necessary that all ways of composure and quieting those storms which the preceding differences and distractions have begotten be with utmost care and prudence endeavoured.

And whereas 'tis urged that if we were in power we would bear ourselves as tyrannically as others have done: we confess indeed that the experimental¹⁸ defections of so many men as have succeeded in

¹⁵ conversations = (not just talking with, but) a way of life among others.

¹⁶ Presbyterians and episcopalians tended to claim divine ordination for their forms of church government, quoting especially from Acts, 1 Timothy and Titus.

¹⁷ It was being proposed that office-holders should be required to take an engagement, which later emerged as one to be 'faithful to the commonwealth as it is now established, without king and Lords'. Refusal would mean loss of office.

¹⁸ experimental = that which has been experienced.

authority, and the exceeding difference we have hitherto found in the same men in a low and in an exalted condition, makes us even mistrust our own hearts and hardly believe our own resolutions of the contrary. And therefore we have proposed such an establishment, as, supposing men to be too flexible and yielding to worldly temptations, they should not yet have a means or opportunity either to injure particulars or prejudice the public without extreme hazard and apparent danger to themselves. Besides, to the objection we have further to say that we aim not at power in ourselves, our principles and desires being in no measure of self-concernment; nor do we rely for obtaining the same upon strength or a forcible obstruction, but solely upon that inbred and persuasive power that is in all good and just things to make their own way in the hearts of men, and so to procure their own establishments.¹⁹

And that makes us at this time naked and defenceless as we are, and amidst so many discouragements on all hands to persevere in our motions and desires of good to the nation, although disowned therein at such a time when the doing thereof can be interpreted no other but a politic delivering us up to slaughter by such as we took our friends – our brethren of several churches²⁰ – and for whom with truth of affection we have even in the most difficult times done many services: all which (and whatsoever else can be done against us) we shall reckon but

¹⁹ This may not be true. *Some* Levellers were clearly very interested in seeing 'strength or forcible obstruction' bring their principles into practice. Leveller mutiny was a problem for the New Model in November 1647, and again from March to May 1649. Lilburne and Overton's writings of 1647 and 1649 often sound like a declaration of (real) war against parliament and the Army grandees.

²⁰ On 25 March 1649, the Leveller leaders had attended particular Baptist congregations to get signatures to *The second part of England's new chains*, an even more aggressive attack on the new regime than *England's new chains*. In doing so they hoped to reactivate an alliance with the congregations which had operated in 1646 and early 1647. But it was not to be. The following Friday or Saturday Samuel Richardson, the Particular Baptist London leader, visited the now-imprisoned authors (plus Walwyn who had had nothing to do with it) and tried to persuade them – perhaps at Cromwell's instigation – to give up their campaign against the government. The Levellers refused, and on Monday 3 April the Particular Baptists, led by William Kiffin, presented a submissive petition of seven churches to the Commons, to be rewarded with the assurance from the Speaker: 'That for yourselves and other christians walking answerable to such professions as in this petition you make, they do assure you of liberty and protection so far as God shall enable them, in all things consistent with Godliness, honesty and civil peace.' After which there was no more alliance between the Levellers and the Independent and Separatist congregations of London. *Walwyn's wiles*, an attack on Walwyn, appeared later in the month under the name not only of John Price, its author, but of seven Congregationalists.

as badges of our sincerity and be no whit discouraged thereby from the discharge of our duties.

For the dissatisfactions that be upon many good men's spirits, for that they are not ascertained whereunto all our motions tend and in what they will centre: though (we conceive) they may have received some general satisfaction from what we have formerly at several times propounded, yet since they were not disposed into such a form and condition as to become practicable, we have with the best care and abilities God has afforded us cast the same into a model and platform which we shall speedily present unto the view and consideration of all as the standard and ultimate scope of our designs, that so (in case of approval) it may be subscribed and returned as agreed upon by the people. And thus far (we conceive) we may without offence or prejudice to authority, proceed; and which we the rather do because we know no better, and indeed no other way or means, but by such an agreement to remove as much as may be all disgusts and heart-burnings and to settle the commonwealth upon the fairest probabilities of a lasting peace and contentful establishment.

The *Agreement of the people* which was presented by his excellency and the officers of the army to the right honourable the commons in parliament, although in many things short (according to our apprehensions) of what is necessary for the good of the commonwealth, and satisfaction of the people – particularly in that it contains no provision for the certain removal of notorious and generally complained of grievances – and although it hath some things of much hazard to the public, yet, had it been put in execution, we should scarcely have interrupted the proceedings thereof, since therein is contained many things of great and important concernment to the commonwealth. But seeing the time proposed therein for reducing the same into practice is now past, and that likewise the generality of the people have not or do not approve of the same – for the reasons (as we suppose) fore-mentioned – we have thought fit to revise it, making only such alterations therein as we conceive really necessary for the welfare, security and safety of the people, together with additional provisions for the taking away of those burdens and grievances which may without real prejudice to the management of public affairs be removed.

And because it is essential to the nature of such an agreement to take its rise from the people, we have therefore purposely declined the presentment thereof to the parliament, and conceive it may speedily

proceed to subscription and so to further practice without any interruption to this representative until the season prefixed in the *Agreement* for the assembling another, by whose immediate succession, without any interval, the affairs of the commonwealth may suffer no stop or intermission.

Lastly, we conceive we are much mistaken in being judged impatient and over-violent in our motions for the public good. To which we answer that could we have had any assurance that what is desired should have otherwise, or by any, have been done, and had not had some taste of the relinquishment of many good things that were promised, we should not have been so earnest and urgent for the doing thereof. (Though we know likewise, it has been very customary in such heretofore as never intended any freedom to the nation to except only against the season, and to protract the time so long till they became sufficiently empowered to justify the total denial and refusal thereof.)

However the main reason of our proceeding as we do is because we prefer the way of a settlement by an agreement of the people before any other whatsoever.

And thus the world may clearly see what we are and what we aim at. We are altogether ignorant, and do from our hearts abominate, all designs and contrivances of dangerous consequence which we are said (but God knows, untruly) to be labouring withal. Peace and freedom is our design. By war we were never gainers, nor ever wish to be; and under bondage we have been hitherto sufferers. We desire however, that what is past may be forgotten – provided the commonwealth may have amends made it for the time to come. And this from our soul we desire, having no men's persons in hatred, and judging it needful that all other respects whatsoever are to give way to the good of the commonwealth. And this is the very truth and inside of our hearts.

From the Tower, 14 April 1649

John Lilburne
William Walwyn
Thomas Prince
Richard Overton