
National Assembly, *Declaration of the
Rights of Man and Citizen, 1789*

Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, decreed by the National Assembly in the sessions of 20th, 21st, 23rd, 24th and 26th August, 1789, accepted by the King

INTRODUCTION

The representatives of the French people, constituted as a National Assembly, considering that ignorance, neglect or contempt for the rights of man are the sole causes of public misfortunes and the corruption of governments, have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable and sacred rights of man, so that this declaration may serve as a constant reminder to all members of society of their rights and duties; so that the acts of the legislative power and of the executive power, being liable at any time to be compared with the purpose of all political institutions, may thereby be the more respected; so that the citizens' demands, henceforth founded on simple and incontrovertible principles, may always operate for the maintenance of the constitution and the good of all.

The National Assembly therefore recognises and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and citizen:

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in respect of their rights; social distinctions can only be based on public utility.
2. The aim of every political association is the protection of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man; these rights are liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression.
3. The fundamental source of all sovereignty resides in the nation; no body of men, no individual can exercise an authority which does not expressly derive therefrom.
4. Liberty consists in being able to do whatever does not harm another. Thus, the exercise of each man's natural rights has no limits other than those which guarantee to the other members of society the enjoyment of these same rights; those limits can only be determined by the law.
5. The law can only forbid acts harmful to society. Whatever is not forbidden by the law cannot be prevented, and no-one can be forced to do what the law does not require.

6. The law is the expression of the general will; all citizens have the right to participate in lawmaking, personally or through their representatives; the law must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens being equal in its eyes, are equally eligible for all public honours, positions and duties, according to their ability, and without any distinction other than those of their virtues and talents.
7. No man may be charged, arrested or detained except under the circumstances laid down by the law and in accordance with the formalities prescribed therein. Those who solicit, promote, carry out or cause to be carried out any arbitrary orders, must be punished; but any citizen lawfully summonsed or arrested must instantly obey: he renders himself liable by resistance.
8. The penalties laid down by law should only be such as are strictly and manifestly necessary, and no-one may be punished except by virtue of an established law, promulgated before the commission of the offence, and lawfully applied.
9. Every man being presumed innocent until found guilty, if his arrest is considered essential, any harshness unnecessary to secure his arrest must be strictly forbidden by the law.
10. No man must be penalised for his opinions, even his religious opinions, provided that their expression does not disturb the public order established by the law.
11. The free expression of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man; every citizen is therefore entitled to freedom of speech, of expression and of the press, save that he is liable for the abuse of this freedom in the circumstances laid down by the law.
12. The rights of man and of the citizen require a public force to guarantee them; this force is therefore established for the good of all, and not for the private benefit of those to whom it is entrusted.
13. A common tax is essential for the upkeep of the public force and for the costs of administration; it must be levied equally on the citizens in accordance with their capacity to pay.
14. The citizens are entitled, in person or through their representatives, to determine the need for public taxation, freely to consent to it, to control its use, and to fix the amount, basis, mode of collection and duration.
15. Society is entitled to require every public servant to give an account of his administration.
16. Any society which lacks a sure guarantee of rights or a fixed separation of powers, has no constitution.

The French Revolution

17. Property being an inviolable and sacred right, no-one may be deprived of it save when this is clearly required by public necessity, lawfully determined, and only on condition of fair and prior compensation.

TO THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE FRENCH PEOPLE

Source: Contemporary print of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* in the Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Reproduced in G. Duby, *Histoire de la France*, volume 2, Paris, Larousse, 1971, p. 306, trans. A. Lentin.