

# Turgot, Anne-Robert-Jacques

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(1727-1781)

Turgot, Anne-Robert-Jacques, Baron de l'Aulne, French economist, who was an administrator under Louis XV and served as the comptroller general of finance (1774-76) under Louis XVI. His efforts at instituting financial reform were blocked by the privileged classes.

## Youth

Turgot was born into an old Norman family whose members had already held some important administrative posts. (His father, Michel- $\acute{e}$ tienne [1690-1751], was to be provost of merchants, "the head of the Paris municipality, from 1729 to 1740.) Destined for the church, he entered the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice (1743) and the Sorbonne (1749), exhibiting both as a schoolboy and as an advanced student a precocious but sound maturity of intellect. He was influenced from his adolescence by all the fashionable ideas of his day: scientific curiosity, liberalism, tolerance, and an interest in social evolution. In 1751, on the threshold of ordination, he drew back, explaining to his relatives that it would have been impossible for him always to have lived under false pretenses, being, in fact, a deist. His occasional attendance at mass was necessitated by his rank.

From that time on, Turgot's friends comprised such philosophes as the Marquis de Condorcet and Pierre-Samuel du Pont de Nemours, who were both attached to the famous physiocratic school of thought, which generally has been regarded as the first scientific school of economics. Late in 1751 he announced his intention of seeking a career in the royal administration and entered the law, becoming a deputy solicitor general in January 1752 and later a counselor magistrate to the Parlement (supreme court of law) in Paris (December 1752).

## Early career

In 1753 he bought, as was the custom, the office of examiner of petitions, thus entering the branch of the magistracy that provided officials for the bureaucracy and that upheld the royal authority. With 39 other examiners he was called upon to serve in the Royal Chamber, which acted as a supreme court in 1753-54, when the Parlement was exiled for defying the crown. He combined his duties with other forms of intellectual activity. In 1753 he translated into French Josiah Tucker's *Reflections on the Expediency of a Law for the Naturalization of Foreign Protestants* (1752) and the following year published *Lettres sur la tol $\acute{e}$ rance* (Letters on Tolerance). Between 1753 and 1756 Turgot accompanied J.-C.-M. Vincent de Gournay, the mentor of the physiocratic school and an intendant of commerce, on his tours of inspection to various French provinces. By 1761 Turgot had drawn enough attention to himself for Louis XV to accept his nomination as intendant to the administrative region of Limoges. He occupied this post, then considered one of the least desirable available, for 13 years and there displayed his extraordinary capacities as an administrator, reformer, and economist. In 1766 he published his best-known work, *Reflections on the Formation and Distribution of Wealth*, to which he was to add—among other famous works—*Lettres sur la lib $\acute{e}$ r $\acute{e}$  du commerce des grains* (1770; *Letters on the Freedom of the Grain Trade*). He introduced new methods to the peasant region he administered, substituting a small tax in money for the corv $\acute{e}$ e (unpaid work required of peasants for the upkeep of roads) compiling a land register (cadastre) for tax purposes and combatting the

famine of 1770-71, during which—despite opposition—he maintained the free commerce in grain. He was appointed comptroller general by Louis XVI on Aug. 24, 1774.”

## Ministry

Turgot was all that a successful courtier should not be. Large and fat, with regular and quite distinguished features, he was nevertheless a shy and awkward bachelor who blushed easily, spoke with hesitation, and was rarely convivially gay. Though his customary serious manner was tinged with humour, he was not persuasive and could irritate a questioner with the brusqueness of his statements, his theoretical cast of thought, and the suppressed irony of his half smile.

Realizing that the young king was inexperienced and wishing to avoid political storms, Turgot temporized during the first days of his ministry, but later, feeling himself threatened by his adversaries, a frenzy for public service drove him to accumulate reforms. He introduced his Six Edicts in 1776. Four of them (suppressing certain dues and offices) were of no great importance, and the fifth (suppressing the guilds of Paris) encountered no serious opposition. It was against the sixth edict, that abolishing the corvée, that his enemies, who defended privilege, concentrated their attack. Appealing in vain to the good sense and courage of the young king from whom he had been alienated by a coalition of financiers, place-holders, privileged classes, and the religious party at court, he saw his reforms abandoned and, after his dismissal on May 12, 1776, forgotten. Five years later, having published nothing since his public disgrace, he died in Paris attended by a few friends.

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