

Voltaire on government

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Teacher Voltaire on Government Voltaire or François-Marie d'Arouet (1694–1778), was a French and public activist who singlehandedly defined the eighteenth-century movement called the Enlightenment. He promoted reason and justice as the engine of his Enlightenment Movement. He is known for his public activism and criticism of the Catholic Church which were at the helm of government during his time. He is France's most prolific writer and outspoken advocate of reform whose works and ideas influenced the French and American Revolution.

Voltaire thought that men were basically evil and should be treated that way. Thus he disliked the French aristocrats to be corrupt and parasitic. He also thought of the bourgeoisie as unfitting to govern and the masses to be ignorant and the church to be superstitious and reactionary. Surprisingly, Voltaire doubted democracy and instead favoured an enlightened monarch or an enlightened dictator (like Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore) who is advised by enlightened philosophers like him. For Voltaire, only an enlightened monarch, dictator or despot can bring about progress and change and not through representational democracy. He did not like nor advocated democracy or representational government because he distrusted the wisdom of the commoner as “propagating the idiocy of the masses” further saying that he “would rather obey one lion than 200 rats of his own species” (Voltaire, 1759 qtd in Haskell, 1985).

Despite these stances against democracy, Voltaire's philosophy became the engine of the Enlightenment Period in the eighteenth century that inspired the French and American Revolutions which served as the basis of modern day democracy.

Reference

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Candide and other Writings, Haskell M. Block (ed.), New York: Modern Library, 1985.