

Public finance and public opinion: a modern debate

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Necker's *Compte rendu* brought the finances of the state into public debate. In the years that followed, pamphlets, memoirs and articles devoted to the debt, to loans and to taxation multiplied. Successive ministers published their own accounts and replied to their critics. Investors, bankers and the Parisian salons followed these controversies closely, because they influenced the credit of the state and the prices of public securities.¹

This irruption of public opinion into public finance was a lasting innovation. It presupposes that creditors, and citizens more broadly, have information with which to judge the management of the state. It creates pressure in favour of transparency and consistency in the accounts. It also exposes financial officials to attack from their opponents, who can use the figures for political ends.

Contemporary states have institutionalised this relationship with investors. They publish budgets, audited accounts, debt management strategies and detailed information intended for the markets. Rating agencies assess their creditworthiness, and their assessments influence the cost of their borrowing. Geneva's wealth managers, who invest in sovereign bonds on behalf of their clients, rely on this information, while knowing, ever since Necker, that it must be read with a critical eye.

1 Notes

1. Encyclopædia Britannica, art. “Jacques Necker”: the 1780s saw a proliferation of financial publications and pamphlets on the health of the royal finances, from the Compte rendu of 1781 to Calonne’s revelation of the deficit in 1787; Necker replied in particular with Sur le compte rendu au roi en 1781. Nouveaux éclaircissements (1788; gallica.bnf.fr). ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-public-finance-and-public-opinion-a-modern-debate