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ACTIVITY 9

Table

After reading about the economy and social structure of France under the old regime, create a table like the one below and fill it in.

Economic and Social Life under the Old Regime

	By First Estate	By Second Estate	By Third Estate
BENEFITS ENJOYED	i) The Catholic Church ii) Upper clergy iii) Lower clergy	i) *noblesse d'épée* ii) *noblesse de court* iii) *noblesse de robe*	i) Bourgeoisie ii) Urban workers iii) Peasants
HARDSHIPS FACED	i) The Catholic Church ii) Upper clergy iii) Lower clergy	i) *noblesse d'épée* ii) *noblesse de court* iii) *noblesse de robe*	i) Bourgeoisie ii) Urban workers iii) Peasants
ASPIRATIONS / GRIEVANCES EXPRESSED	i) The Catholic Church ii) Upper clergy iii) Lower clergy	i) *noblesse d'épée* ii) *noblesse de court* iii) *noblesse de robe*	i) Bourgeoisie ii) Urban workers iii) Peasants

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ACTIVITY 10

Short Essay

Write a 400–600 word essay on **one** of the topics below. Your essay should include an introduction, paragraphs supported by evidence and historians' views, a conclusion and a bibliography.

- 'Under the old regime the Church divided, rather than united, the people of France.' Do you agree?
- To what extent was social mobility possible under the *ancien régime*?
- 'By the late eighteenth century, it was not possible for absolute monarchy and a rigid social structure to survive a challenge.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?
- 'Under the old regime, the Church's spiritual role was compromised by its privileged position and this divided its clergy and their congregations.' Do you agree?
- To what extent was social mobility possible within the rigid structures of the *ancien régime*?
- To what extent was the lack of modernisation and growth in most sectors of the French economy a cause of tensions leading to revolution by 1789?

Bankruptcy and the Aristocratic Revolt

The foreign debt and Necker's *Compte Rendu* 1781

In February 1781, the King's chief financial officer, Comptroller-General Jacques Necker, published the first public account of the financial situation of the French state. Produced with the consent of the King, Louis XVI, the ***Compte Rendu au Roi*** sold as rapidly as a popular novel, with twenty thousand copies going to the public within a few weeks. It was then translated into Dutch, German, Danish, English and Italian. Thus, the seemingly prosperous state of the finances of France became a matter of public knowledge, as Necker had intended.

Louis had appointed Necker Comptroller-General in 1776. It was an unusual appointment because Necker was Swiss by birth, a commoner by estate and a Protestant. His passport to power, says historian William Doyle, was 'his opulence as a banker.'[20] It was this reputation as a financial genius that led, in part, to the acceptance of the *Compte Rendu* as a true indication of France's financial state.

The *Compte Rendu* showed ordinary revenues to be exceeding expenditure by over ten million livres, even after three years of French involvement in the American War of Independence and no increases in taxation. Thus, France's accounts appeared to have a healthy surplus. The *Compte Rendu*, however, did not include a record of the extraordinary accounts, where the real cost of the war was recorded. Had it done so, France's bankers would not have been so eager to lend money for the war: the war account was in deep deficit. As it was, Necker's reputation for financial management grew even greater.

Over the eighteenth century, the French monarchy had consistently spent more than its annual income and the major cost had been foreign wars. From 1740 to 1748, France had been engaged in the War of Austrian Succession. This was followed by the Seven Years War (1756–1763) in which France suffered a bitter defeat by Britain. As a result of this war, France lost almost all of its empire, especially its territories in India and Northern America, while Britain had also destroyed the French navy and merchant marine.

The Comte de Vergennes, Foreign Minister to both Louis XV and Louis XVI, reflected French feeling when he said,

> The humiliating peace of 1763 shows the ascendancy which England has gained over France and ... how much that arrogant nation enjoys the pleasure of having humiliated us.[21]

Thus, when in 1776 the American colonists rose in revolution against Britain in the War of Independence, France supported the colonists. From 1778, France sent soldiers and equipment to America, as well as providing financial support, and this added greatly to the burden of debt already carried by the French state.

20 Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 29.

21 Cited in Alberto Morales, *East Meets West*, Vol.1 (1760–1815) (Hong Kong: Macmillan), 160.

Necker certainly instituted some fiscal reforms in the attempt to balance the French budget. He reorganised central accounting procedures and began restructuring taxation, thus taking steps towards establishing a central treasury. He commissioned a nation-wide survey of venal offices, in order to determine how many there were and how much the Crown was receiving from them. Once this was accomplished venal officers could be replaced by salaried officials, who would be more accountable to the Crown. Necker also set up provincial assemblies of land-owners to offset the influence of the ***parlements*** (high law courts). However, the American War was a huge drain on France's resources and Necker had to finance it entirely by loans. Between 1777 and May 1781 he raised 520 million livres in loans, with generous terms and high interest rates. The interest on these loans was charged to ordinary expenditure.

After Necker's departure from office in 1781, his successor, Joly de Fleury, was forced to raise another 252 million livres in loans and to increase taxation. Then, between 1783 and 1787, Fleury's replacement, Charles-Alexandre de Calonne, borrowed another 653 million livres, much of it in short-term loans. By the time the American War of Independence ended in 1783, the conflict had cost France over one billion livres,[22] and this did not include debts from the earlier Seven Years War and War of Austrian Succession. In addition, the *vingtième* (twentieth) tax, levied for the duration of the war and three years after, would come to an end in 1786.

Thus, by 1786, France was facing bankruptcy. The income of the state in 1775 totalled 377.2 million livres, but expenditure was 411.4 million, making a deficit of some 34.2 million livres. Servicing of the debts was alone consuming 37.5 per cent of revenue.[23] In 1786, there would be a deficit of 112 million livres, almost a quarter of the total income. In addition, almost half of the income for 1787 had already been spent in advance, by taking out short-term loans in anticipation of tax revenue and, over the next ten years, there would also be a heavy burden of debt redemption from the American War. Calonne had no alternative but to institute major tax reform. In correspondence with Necker, for example, he noted that

> it is impossible to tax further, ruinous to be always borrowing and not enough to confine ourselves to measures of economy ... Ordinary ways are unable to lead us to our goal ... The only effective remedy, the only means of managing finally to put the finances truly in order, must consist in reviving the entire state by recasting all that is unsound in its constitution.[24]

Like the former comptrollers-general, Necker and Fleury, Calonne recognised that a taxation system which exempted the wealthy aristocracy and the Church was not sustainable. Also, the privileges accorded to the *pays d'état* (border provinces) and the various other bodies had created an overly complex system which was prone to corruption. At the heart of the problem, Calonne believed, was the system of privilege.

?

DID YOU KNOW?

The Italian priest Abbé Galiani said that 'All France's wealth is concentrated on its frontiers, all its big opulent cities are on its edges and the interior is fearfully weak, empty and thin.' While this was an exaggeration, those port cities trading with Europe and the French colonies grew rapidly in size and wealth during the eighteenth century.

22 McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 35; Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 68.

23 Colin Jones, cited in Mark Fielding and Margot Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change: France in Revolution* (Australia: McGraw Hill, 2001), 20.

24 Letter to Jacques Necker, April 1787, cited in Fielding and Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change*, 18.

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ACTIVITY 11

Document Analysis

Read the document and complete the tasks that follow.

Alexandre de Calonne, letter to Jacques Necker, 1787.

[*The system of privilege*] *alone infects everything, harms everything and prevents any improvements ... a kingdom composed of* pays d'état, pays d'élection, administrations provinciales *and* administrations mixtes *– a Kingdom whose provinces are foreign one to another; where multiple internal frontiers separate and divide the subjects of the same sovereign; where certain regions are totally freed from taxes, the full weight of which is borne by other regions; where the richest class is the least taxed; where privilege prevents all stability ... Such a state is inevitably a very imperfect kingdom, full of corrupt practices and impossible to govern well. In effect, the result is that general administration is excessively complicated, public contributions unequally spread, trade hindered by countless restrictions ... agriculture crushed by overwhelming burdens* [*and*] *the state's finances impoverished.*[25]

1 Explain what Calonne means when he says that 'certain regions are totally freed from taxes, the full weight of which is borne by other regions.'

2 Why might Calonne have said that 'privilege prevents all stability'?

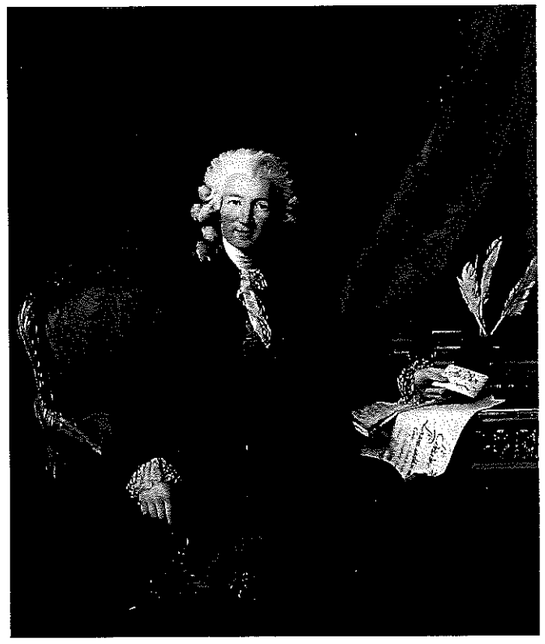
3 What difficulties would Calonne experience if he tried to abolish the existing system of privilege?

4 Find statistical support for the statement that agriculture was 'crushed by overwhelming burdens,' and for the description of state finances as 'impoverished.'

5 From your broader knowledge, explain why increasing taxes on the Third Estate to raise revenue was not an option for Calonne.

Calonne's plan for taxation reform

On 20 August 1786, Calonne presented his Plan for the Improvement of the Finances to Louis XVI. He proposed that the three *vingtièmes* (the 'twentieth' tax imposed in time of war) be removed altogether, that the tax privileges traditionally held by various groups be abolished, and that a new direct tax be created, a 'territorial subvention,' or tax on all land-owners without any exemptions. This would be evaluated according to the land-owner's income and be paid in produce, thus moving the burden of tax from the Third Estate to a more uniform system which would also tax the wealthy, whatever their birth. Calonne anticipated that this tax alone would bring in revenue of around thirty-five million livres.[26] The tax would be assessed and collected through provincial assemblies comprised of land-owners, working in co-operation with the Intendants of the various provinces. In addition, the stamp tax on all documents would be extended and the *corvée*, the forced labour on the roads, would be replaced with a direct tax. The nobility were to be excused from the *capitation* and remained exempt from the *taille*.



Charles-Alexandre de Calonne, Comptroller-General of France (1783–1 May 1788), Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun, 1784.

Finally, Calonne attempted to stimulate trade within France by abolishing internal tax barriers and removing controls over the grain trade.[27] With the removal of internal customs duties and of fixed prices for grain, France would move towards the creation of a national market and this, in turn, would stimulate France's economy. The removal of the *corvée* and its substitution by a monetary tax would be another encouragement to the peasants to produce more. In the meantime, while these reforms were put in place, Calonne needed to borrow still more money until the new revenues began to flow in. The combination of the new tax, increased efficiencies in management and on-going debt redemption would, he believed, avert the looming financial disaster.

In order to borrow more, Calonne had to convince the bankers that his reforms would pass into law and to do this he needed to demonstrate that they had support from the most powerful groups in France. He knew that his plan would face formidable opposition from the nobility and the upper hierarchy of the French Catholic Church, both of which were financially and socially advantaged by the system of privilege. Thus, Calonne proposed that Louis XVI convoke an Assembly of Notables. As in 1626, the year the Notables had last been summoned by their sovereign, the members of the Assembly would be nominated by the King and would comprise

> the principal and most enlightened persons of the kingdom, to whom the king deigns to communicate his views and whom he invites to apprise [tell] him of their reflections ... People of weight, worthy of the public's confidence and such that their approbation [support] would powerfully influence general opinion.[28]

Calonne's thinking was that if the hand-picked upper nobility and princes of the Church lent their support, the display of unity and loyalty to the monarchy would both reassure lenders that their money was safe and would persuade the ***Parlement of Paris*** that the plan should be registered without protest.[29] He also calculated that the status of the members of the Assembly of Notables would impress the Parlement of Paris, the high court whose responsibility it was to register the King's edicts. The nobles and prelates (churchmen of high office) chosen by Calonne would be unlikely to challenge the King's authority and thus the tax reforms should gain their support. With both Church and nobility endorsing the plan, the magistrates of the Parlement would give a smooth passage to it. Yet this was a risky procedure, as Peter McPhee has pointed out, because the nobility already felt its position to be under threat from two sources, the monarchy itself and the rising bourgeois class beneath it. More specifically McPhee observed that

> The entrenched hostility of most nobles towards fiscal and social reform was generated by two long-term factors: first, the long-term pressures of royal state-making, which reduced the nobility's autonomy; and, secondly, by the challenge from a wealthier, larger and more critical bourgeoisie and an openly disaffected peasantry towards aristocratic conceptions of property, hierarchy and social order.[30]

On 29 December 1786, the list of Notables was announced. There were to be 144 nominated members: seven princes of the blood, fourteen bishops, thirty-six noblemen, twelve members of the Council of State and Intendants, thirty-eight magistrates, twelve representatives of the *pays d'etat*, and twenty-five mayors.[31] Among them was the Queen's favourite, the ambitious Loménie de Brienne, Archbishop of Toulouse, and the Marquis de Lafayette, hero of the American War. Although over ninety per cent of the population belonged to the Third Estate, this group remained largely unrepresented, with fewer than thirty members drawn from the common people.[32]

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DID YOU KNOW?

Loménie de Brienne, Archbishop of Toulouse, was said to be a churchman for practical rather than spiritual reasons. When his name was put forward for a position in the capital, Louis XVI asked, 'But isn't it necessary that the Archbishop of Paris should at least believe in God?'

25 Cited in Fielding and Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change*, 18.

26 Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 96.

27 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 69.

28 J. Egret, *La Prérevolution Française 1787–1788* (Paris, 1962), cited in Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 97.

29 The Parlement of Paris registered the king's laws. If magistrates were not happy with a law they could exercise their right of remonstrance by returning it to the king's ministers for redrafting (though they could not technically block it). They often cited the interests of the people when challenging a law.

30 McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 35.

31 Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 98.

32 A. Goodwin, *The French Revolution* (UK: Hutchinson University Library, 1970). Peter McPhee, by contrast, says that 'only ten were non-noble,' *The French Revolution*, 35.

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ACTIVITY 12

Discussion

With your class, discuss Calonne's reasons for convening the Assembly of Notables to approve his tax plan in February 1787.

Political crises

The meeting of the Notables 22 February 1787

The success of Calonne's plan depended on two things: the support of the King and the compliance of the Notables. Neither of these proved to be reliable. When the Notables convened at Versailles in February, Louis XVI was personally distracted by the illness of his fourth child, Princess Sophie, who was to die of tuberculosis in the summer of that year, and Calonne himself was ill. Nor did the Notables come in a compliant mood, ready to approve whatever was suggested. Indeed, William Doyle has argued that 'in a controversial career Calonne had made many enemies and they were well represented in the Assembly ... The first president of the Parlement of Paris was ... a personal enemy.'[33] Doyle has suggested, therefore, that 'if Calonne's proposals had come from anybody else there is little doubt that the Notables would have welcomed them more warmly.'[34] In the wider community there was also much suspicion about Calonne's motives. In the attempt to reassure creditors that France's finances were healthy, he had spent lavishly on public works, including the beautification of royal residences. Then, there was the extravagant lifestyle of the court at Versailles – were the people being asked to pay for the entertainment of the rich? Finally, there were questions to be answered about Calonne's management of the finances: how was it possible that the surplus of ten million livres under Necker had become an enormous debt by 1787? Was it not due to poor management by Calonne?

Calonne presented a persuasive argument. The new land tax would simplify the taxation system. Land-owners' liabilities would take into account fluctuations in the seasons and the personal wealth of the land-owner. The local provincial assemblies, representing the land-owners, would help assess and collect the taxes. The eradication of customs duties and the *corvée* and their replacement by a single tax on imports would help create a more efficient national economy.

The Aristocratic Revolt

Most of Calonne's proposals met with the approval of the Notables, subject to some changes. The Notables accepted the idea of local assemblies, stating only that the nobility and clergy should be guaranteed a fixed proportion of seats and that the decisions of the assemblies should not be able to be overturned by the Intendant. They agreed to the changes to the *corvée* but went further than Calonne, suggesting that the tax be applied to all as a

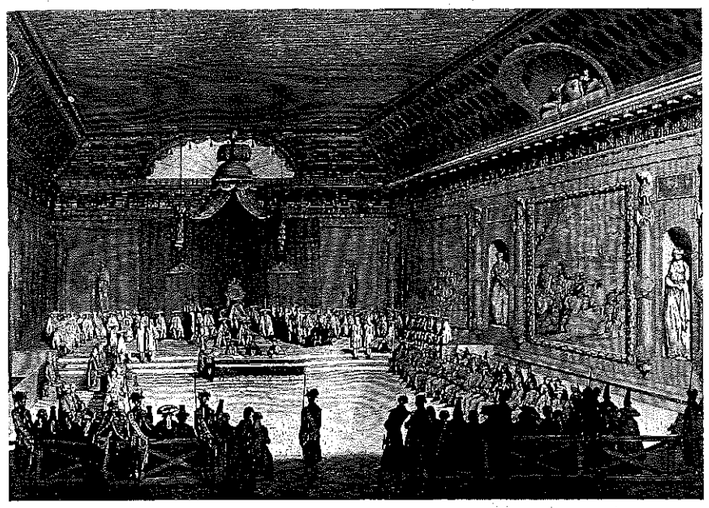
33 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 71.

34 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 71.

THE ASSEMBLY OF NOTABLES

Michael Adcock has drawn our attention to the importance of the concept of representation in the French Revolution, which is clearly demonstrated in the visual arts of the period. Adcock has defined the idea of 'representation' as the meeting of a specific number of people to represent the wishes of society in general.[35] Adcock has analysed this engraving of the Assembly of Notables to show how political representation in the last decade of the old regime was 'a highly formalised and controlled process.'[36] The arrangement of those taking part in the Assembly was carefully worked out according to the precedent set in 1626 when the last Assembly of Notables had met. Simon Schama has included the floor plan used in 1787 in his account.[37]

The hierarchy, formality, pomp and ceremony are very clear in this image.



The Assembly of Notables, engraving by Berthault and Prieur, 1787. Private collection of Michael Adcock.

35 Michael Adcock and Graeme Worrall, *The French Revolution: A Student Handbook* (Melbourne: HTAV, 1997), 40.

36 Adcock and Worrall, *The French Revolution*.

37 Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1989), 239.

public works tax, not just to those who had been previously liable. They also agreed to the elimination of internal customs charges.

However, when it came to the question of relinquishing their fiscal (taxation) privileges, there was widespread dissent. The bishops argued that they could not give up the Church's right to self-assessment of tax without first obtaining the assent of the Assembly of the Clergy. The magistrates said they had to consult their fellow magistrates in the courts. Some of the Notables wanted the new 'territorial subvention' to be assessed differently and paid as a monetary tax, rather than in produce. The largest impediment, however, was that the Notables, while declaring themselves in favour of tax reform, refused to approve the new tax unless they were fully informed of the state of the finances.

Lafayette wrote to George Washington,

> We were not the representatives of the Nation but ... we declared that altho' we had no right to impede, it was our right not to advise unless we thought the measures were proper and we could not think of new taxes unless we knew the returns of the economy.[38]

This demand to scrutinise the royal accounts put the Notables in conflict with the monarchy. As an absolute monarch, Louis XVI was the sole authority in the state, as his predecessor Louis XIV had indicated when he said '*L'etat, c'est moi*' ('The State, it is I'). He alone had power over taxation and his authority was not subject to the consent of his people. The Notables, in demanding access to the full accounts, were making the King responsible to them. They were, effectively, claiming to be the 'representatives of the nation.' In March, Leblanc de Castillon from the Parlement of Aix extended the political debate still further by claiming that the Assembly of Notables lacked the power to approve new taxation: this right belonged to an Estates-General representing the whole of the people.[39]

38 O. Browning, ed., *The Letters of Lafayette to George Washington 1777–1799*, cited in Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 72.

With no consensus possible, Louis XVI dismissed Calonne and appointed his rival, the Queen's favourite, Archbishop Loménie de Brienne, as Principal Minister and Head of the Committee of Finance. Brienne, however, was not able to negotiate any agreement with the Assembly of Notables and it was dissolved in late May 1787.

39 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 72.

40 Albert Soboul, *A Short History of the French Revolution 1789–1799* (University of California Press, 1977), 37.

41 Soboul, *A Short History of the French Revolution*, 38.

42 Rudé, *The French Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 8.

43 Schama, *Citizens*, 245.

44 Schama, *Citizens*, 244.

45 David Andress, *French Society in Revolution 1789–1799* (Manchester University Press, 1999), 37.

46 Andress, *French Society in Revolution*, 39.

47 Andress, *French Society in Revolution*, 42.

HISTORIANS' VIEWS

Why did the Notables challenge Calonne's plan? The Marxist historians, like George Rudé and Albert Soboul, viewed all history as a struggle between the classes that had wealth and power – the clergy and nobility – and those who did not – the bourgeoisie, urban workers and peasants of the Third Estate. They believed that the Notables' main purpose was to defend their own privileges.

Soboul claimed that 'the Assembly of Notables, by definition a group of aristocrats, met ... and after criticizing the planned tax, demanded a statement of the Treasury's accounts.'[40] The paralysis of the monarchy that resulted from the quarrel between the King and the nobility led to revolution:

> The bourgeoisie, the leading element in the Third Estate, now took over. Its aim was revolutionary: to destroy aristocratic privilege and to establish legal and civic equality in a society that would no longer be composed of orders and constituted bodies. But the bourgeoisie intended to stay within the law. Before long, however, it was carried forward by the pressure of the masses, the real motive force behind the revolution ....[41]

Similarly, George Rudé wrote, 'The Notables refused to endorse ministerial reforms because their own cherished fiscal immunities were threatened.'[42]

Simon Schama's interpretation is radically different from that of the older generation of historians. Schama has claimed that 'though they are usually dismissed as the tail-end of the old regime, with respect to political self-consciousness the Notables were the first revolutionaries.'[43] He based this assessment on three main points: that the Assembly was 'marked by a conspicuous acceptance of principles like fiscal equality,' that the 'social personality of the notables as landowners and agrarian businessmen gave them a strong sense of the redundancy of privilege,' and that they 'matched Calonne's radicalism step by step and in many cases even advanced beyond him.' In supporting this argument Schama used this analogy:

> It was rather as though [Calonne] had set out to drive an obstinate mule with a very heavy wagon, only to find that the mule was a racehorse and had galloped into the distance, leaving the rider in the ditch.[44]

Schama is a cultural historian, who looks at the details of a moment and finds meaning in small symbols. In his view, the nobility and clergy of France were not only willing to bring an end to their own privileges, but were more radical and egalitarian than Calonne could possibly have anticipated.

David Andress has struck a balance between these two positions. He has acknowledged that the Notables 'rejected both the methods of the past and the state's [monarchy's] solutions with almost one voice.'[45] While Calonne interpreted this as the continued resistance of 'privilege' to reform, Andress has claimed that 'much in the deliberations of the Notables suggested they, too, were finding new ways of thinking.' Andress, like Schama, has suggested that the Notables were assessing matters in the practical terms of land-owners concerned about the efficient use of property and adequate security for its returns. The Notables spent much time raising the issue of excessive state expenditure, which in itself was a method of criticising the court and its excesses. This, Andress has asserted, became a method of expressing a new phenomenon in political life, public opinion, which by 1788, with its support of the *parlements*' resistance to royal despotism, was to explode in a way that would have been unthinkable under a securely entrenched absolute divine right monarchy.[46] While the Notables' appeal to 'rights' and 'public opinion' against 'ministerial despotism' both accentuated the wider debate about citizenship and taxation, it finally exposed them once it became evident (later, in September 1788) that they had no intention of renouncing the privileges of a corporate social order.[47]

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ACTIVITY 13

Historiographical Exercise

Discuss the varying interpretations of the Notables by Rudé, Soboul, Schama and Andress. How do you account for the differences in points of view?

Étienne Charles de Loménie de Brienne (1727–1794), Principal Minister and head of the Committee of Finance between May 1787 and August 1788.

Brienne and the Parlement of Paris

Regardless of the objections of the Assembly of Notables, the bankruptcy crisis meant the government could not abandon Calonne's reforms. In July 1787 Brienne proposed a new plan which would retain the land tax but which modified Calonne's other reforms. With the Notables dissolved, Brienne took the tax decrees directly to the Parlement of Paris for registration.

The Parlement of Paris was the sovereign court of appeal, one of whose roles was to register royal edicts so that they became law. It was the most important of the thirteen appeal courts. In the eighteenth century, the aristocracy monopolised all the highest offices in the land, from the government and military to the Church and judiciary, so the magistrates of the Parlement of Paris were all members of the Second Estate, either by birth or because they had paid to acquire the office of magistrate (a venal office). While some of the provincial *parlements* insisted that only *noblesse de robe* could be appointed as magistrates, Sutherland states that this was not so with the Parlement of Paris. Rather,

> The Parlement of Paris, whose jurisdiction covered one-third of the country, never bothered to restrict its entry and remained amazingly open to the rich men of banking, high finance and government service, most of whom were noble already.[48]

The role of the Parlement of Paris in registering edicts was also to scrutinise (verify) them, in order to determine whether they accorded with France's ancient constitution, that is, with previous laws. If difficulties appeared, the *parlementaires* had the ***right to remonstrate***, that is to point out any defects in the new legislation and return it to the King for reconsideration and, perhaps, redrafting. However, they did not have the power to reject the King's edicts, only to delay them. It was, according to William Doyle, a significant power:

> By deferring registration pending the king's reply, they were able to delay and obstruct government policy, and since the death of Louis XV, they had developed this technique into a major vehicle of opposition.[49]

Furthermore, by publishing the remonstrance, the *parlementaires* could rally public opposition to the legislation and, as a last resort, go on strike or even make a mass resignation. In the end, however, the French king was an absolute monarch. In spite of any tactics the Parlement might use, he could, through a ***lit de justice***, come to the court in person to witness the reading of a royal command to force the registration because, as the supreme source of justice, his presence cancelled the authority of the magistrates.

Increasingly, however, the *parlements* attempted to convert the right of remonstrance into a right to veto (disallow) royal legislation. This was based on the argument that the King held his throne and his legitimacy as a monarch from fundamental laws which were unchangeable. The function of the *parlements* was to 'maintain the citizens in the enjoyment of rights which the laws assure them.'[50] This claim placed the *parlements* as guardians of the rights of the people, defenders of both their liberty and their money. Indeed, the *parlements* argued that they had a special right to scrutinise new taxes:

> The infraction of the sacred right of verification [of laws] simultaneously violates the rights of the Nation and the rights of legislation; it follows that the collection of a tax which has not been verified is a crime against the Constitution.[51]

These claims were more strongly made in theory than in practice. For the most part, the *parlements* accommodated the monarch's policies with little protest. Rabaut Saint-Etienne, later to be a deputy to the Estates-General, said the nation saw the *parlements* 'as a barrier to despotism of which everyone was weary,' while the Abbé Morellet wrote that they let the people 'be overwhelmed [with taxes] for over a century [permitting government] all its waste and its loans which it knew all about.'[52]

?

DID YOU KNOW?

The Parlement of Paris had jurisdiction over a third of French land and two thirds of French people, making it the most powerful court in the country.

?

DID YOU KNOW?

Louis XVI was in favour of inoculation against smallpox but as the Parlement of Paris opposed it, the public was swayed by the latter.

48 D.M.G. Sutherland, *France 1789–1815 Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (London: Fontana, 1985), 16.

49 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 17.

50 Sutherland, *France 1789–1815*, 23.

51 Sutherland, *France 1789–1815*.

52 Sutherland, *France 1789–1815*, 24.

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ACTIVITY 14

Focus Question

Why could Calonne expect difficulties in registering the tax edicts?

Lit de Justice Held in the Parliament at the Majority of Louis XV (1710-74), 22 February 1723, oil on canvas, Nicolas Lancret, Louvre, Paris.

The Parlement of Paris as the champion of the people 1787–88

Brienne's tax reforms were presented to the Parlement of Paris, sitting as a Court of Peers: that is, some of the dukes and peers of France sat alongside the magistrates of the Parlement, making it a much more self-confident body, especially as some peers had also been part of the Assembly of Notables. Instead of accepting the tax bills, on 2 July 1787 the Parlement rejected them, arguing that only the nation, assembled through an Estates-General, possessed the right to determine the need for tax reform. It was not, therefore, solely the prerogative of the monarch. Without the consent of the people, the Parlement would not consent to registration of the edicts. In the remonstrance presented by the Parlement, its position was clearly stated: 'The constitutional principle of the French monarchy was that taxes should be consented to by those who had to bear them.'[53]

On 6 August 1787, Louis attempted to assert his absolute power through a *lit de justice*. The Parlement declared that such an action was invalid. The tension which emerged from this action was so great that on 15 August 1787 Louis exiled the Parlement to Troyes. This decision encouraged popular uprisings against the monarchy, with many of the lower courts protesting against the King's action, supported by demonstrations in the streets and markets in support of the magistrates of the Paris Parlement. Ex-minister Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, who supported the Parlement's stand, observed that

> The Parlement of Paris is, at the moment, but the echo of the public of Paris, and ... the public of Paris is that of the entire nation. It is the *parlement* which speaks, because it is the only body that has the right to speak; but let there be no illusion that if any assembly of citizens had this right, it would make the same use of it. So we are dealing with the entire nation; it is to the nation that the king responds when he responds to the Parlement.[54]

What was at the heart of the dispute? The bankruptcy crisis and Calonne's decision to call on the Assembly of Notables demonstrated that the monarchy's power was, at least momentarily, weak. This allowed the aristocracy represented in the Notables and the Parlement of Paris to attempt to gain some of the power they had lost since the time of Louis XIV. The Parlement of Paris moved the struggle further along: while the Notables demanded the monarchy be responsible to the people for the way it used taxation revenue, the Parlement was demanding that its right to register laws and edicts be recognised as the power to veto royal tax legislation if it did not have the consent of the nation. It claimed this power as the people's representatives in policy making. Thus, the Parlement appeared as the people's champions against the 'despotism' of the King's ministers. Absolute power was thus confronted by popular power.

It was, perhaps because of this recognition that a truce was sought. In mid-September the magistrates and the King's minister reached a compromise: the Parlement would be recalled and Brienne's tax plan would be modified. The government withdrew the territorial subvention and the stamp tax, but retained the *vingtièmes*. This seemed to be a win for the Parlement. Certainly the magistrates' return to Paris was greeted as a triumph, although not by everybody.

53 Schama, *Citizens*, 264.

54 Malesherbes, cited in Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 107.

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ACTIVITY 15

Focus Questions

1 Why was Brienne unable to register the tax reforms?

2 What was the fundamental issue in the dispute between the King and the Parlement of Paris?

The Royal Session of 19 November 1787: absolutism in action

Among those who had hoped for political reform there was a sharp sense of disappointment. The provincial *parlements*, which had supported Paris, felt abandoned. Mirabeau and Lafayette, both peers who had supported the *parlements*, deplored the concessions to royal power and the Abbé Morellet wrote bitterly,

> On whom would you have the nation rely today? The *parlements*, which defended it so badly, have again deserted it ... We need some bar to the repetition of abuses; we need an Estates-General or the equivalent. That is what people everywhere are saying.[55]

Brienne was forced into a programme of financial cutbacks and loans which, again, had to be authorised by the Parlement. He proposed borrowing 420 million livres between 1788 and 1792, to be used to pay off short-term debts due over the period, and promised in return that financial cut-backs would be imposed on the royal household, the military and the bureaucracy. In return for registration he made a series of concessions, including the calling of an Estates-General by 1792. The compromise, however, was doomed. Louis XVI's minister for justice, Chrétien François de Lamoignan, antagonised the magistrates by using the royal sitting (*séance royale*) on 19 November to reiterate the King's absolute authority. Lamoignan stated that

> Sovereign power in his kingdom belongs to the King alone ... He is accountable only to God for the exercise of supreme power ... The link that unites the king and the nation is by nature indissoluble ... The king is the sovereign ruler of the nation and is one with it ... Legislative power resides in the person of the sovereign, depending on and sharing with no-one.[56]

Louis XVI then ordered that the loans be immediately registered, with discussion occurring only after the registration. William Doyle has reported that the Duc d'Orléans, head of the junior branch of the royal family and 'heir to a long tradition of obstructionism,' astonished everyone by protesting that this action was illegal.[57] Louis replied, 'That is of no importance to me ... It is legal because I will it.'[58]

This led to outright rebellion. Doyle has written that 'no reply could have been more catastrophic ... The King's words turned what seemed destined to be a government triumph into a disaster.'[59] The next day, after three-and-a-half hours of debate, the Parlement of Paris refused to register the loan. D'Orléans and two of the leading magistrates were exiled to the country by ***lettres de cachet***. Then the peers were refused the right to sit in the Parlement. It was, says William Doyle, 'open war.'[60] The provincial *parlements* supported the magistrates, refusing in their turn to register the loans and

55 Morellet, cited in Sutherland, *France 1789–1815*, 30.

56 Lamoignan, cited in McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 36.

57 Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 80.

58 Sutherland, *France 1789–1815*, 31.

59 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 80.

60 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*.

condemning the use of *lettres de cachet* as illegal. In January 1788, Louis publicly stated the basis for his decision:

> When I come to personally hold my *Parlement*, it is because I wish to hear a discussion of the law that I have brought with me and to learn more about it before I decide on its registration. This is what I did on November 19 last ... If, in my courts, my will was subject to the majority vote the monarchy would be nothing more than an aristocracy of magistrates, as adverse to the rights and interests of the nation as to those of the sovereign. Indeed, it would be a strange constitution that diminished the will of the King to the point that it is worth no more than the opinion of one of his officers, and requires that legislators have as many opinions as there are different decisions arising from the various courts of law in the kingdom.[61]

The split between the King and the Parlement of Paris widened. It was widely rumoured that the intention of the King's ministers was to get rid of the Parlement altogether. Thus, the Parlement went on the offensive, condemning the forcible registration of the loans in November, forbidding tax collectors to apply the new taxes. On 3 May 1788 the Parlement issued a solemn declaration of what it regarded as the 'fundamental laws of the realm,' including 'the right of the Nation freely to grant subsides' (taxes) through regular meetings of the Estates-General: 'the right of the *Parlements* to register new laws; and the freedom of all Frenchmen from arbitrary arrest.'[62] On 4 May it further responded to the King's accusations by declaring,

> The heir to the throne is designated by the law; the nation has its rights; the Peerage likewise; the Magistracy is irremovable; each province has its customs ... each subject his natural judges, each citizen his property; if he is poor, at least he has his liberty. Yet we dare to ask: which of these rights, which of these laws can stand up against the claims by your ministers in Your Majesty's name?[63]

Such a challenge to the King's authority could not be tolerated. An order was made for the arrest of the magistrates involved, but when troops went to the Parlement, it refused to hand over the magistrates or to close its session. For eleven hours there was a stand-off. Finally, with soldiers surrounding the Palais de Justice (law court), the magistrates were arrested. On 8 May 1788, the King held another *lit de justice* where Brienne attempted to introduce a programme of reforms, the most contentious of which was a proposal to replace the *parlements* with a new Plenary Court which would register royal decrees; this was designed to quell the rising tide of opposition to the monarchy. Although he also promised to establish a new central Treasury, introduce codification of the laws, reform the education system, extend religious tolerance to Protestants and Jews and develop a new and more efficient (but less costly) army, the message was clear. The Parlement of Paris and the provincial *parlements* were suspended. In the struggle between judicial power and the absolute monarchy, the monarchy had won, but only temporarily. The Revolution had begun.

Popular revolts support the Parlement: the Day of Tiles

Within a week the country was in uproar: the magistrates were hailed as defenders of the people's rights and there were protests and demonstrations demanding their recall. The provincial *parlements* refused to be dismissed and stood behind the Parlement of Paris. There were increasing demands for an Estates-General. In five provincial *parlements*, the magistrates were exiled through *lettres de cachet*. The *parlements* were supported in many places by craftsmen, wig and lace makers, domestic servants and other common people whose livelihoods would be threatened if the *parlements* were abolished. In Grenoble on 10 June 1788, the inhabitants of the town stood on the roofs of their houses to shower tiles on the soldiers below, who had come to arrest the magistrates. While one regiment of soldiers obeyed orders not to shoot, a second opened fire, killing two people. The governor's house was looted and the magistrates, in their red robes, were led back in triumph to the court. Simon Schama has described the Day of the Tiles as

> a three-fold revolution. It signified the breakdown of royal authority and the helplessness of military force in the face of sustained urban disorder. It warned the elite ... that there was an unpredictable price to be paid for their encouragement of riot and one that might very easily be turned against themselves. And most important of all, it delivered the initiative for further political action into the hands of a younger, more radical group.[64]

Amongst this more radical group were Antoine-Pierre Barnave, a lawyer, and Jean-Joseph Mounier, the son of a draper, who were to make their mark upon the nation as deputies to the Estates-General in 1789.

There were riots in Paris, Rennes, Pau and Dijon, fuelled in part by the high price of food following crop failures. The nobility of Brittany sent a delegation to the King asking him to condemn his ministers as criminals, but they were arrested as they approached Paris and thrown into the Bastille. Hostile pamphlets – some 534 between May and September – were published, attacking the ministers. Even the clergy joined in the protests, refusing to pay more than a small *don gratuit* to Louis as a signal of their disapproval. On 5 July 1788, Brienne announced that the King would welcome submissions on the composition of an Estates-General. The 'aristocratic revolution' had succeeded.

Bankruptcy

The truth was, the King's government had little choice. There were only 400 000 livres left in the Treasury. This was, according to Simon Schama, 'enough money for the government to function for one afternoon.'[65] The government had already borrowed against 'anticipations' of future revenue and, on 13 July, a massive hail storm had destroyed much of the grain harvest in the areas around Paris. Similar events around the country meant that tax revenues from the peasants would be much lower in the year to come.

Faced with an empty treasury and a tidal wave of protests, on 8 August Louis XVI announced the calling of an Estates-General for 1 May 1789 in an effort to initiate a return of confidence in the government. On 16 August, Louis' government was forced to suspend all payments to the bureaucracy and the army and for repayment of foreign debts. Brienne himself resigned on 24 August, having suggested that Necker be recalled as 'the only man I know who could restore the confidence of the people.'

61 Cited in M.J. Mavidal and M.E. Laurent, eds., *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, première série (1787–1799), second edition, 82 vols. (Paris: Dupont, 1879–1913): 1: 284.

62 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 81.

63 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*.

64 Schama, *Citizens*, 277.

65 Schama, *Citizens*, 282.

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ACTIVITY 16

Focus Questions

1 What had the Parlement of Paris hoped to achieve in refusing to register the tax reforms?

2 Did it expect to begin a revolution?

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ACTIVITY 17

Discussion

With a partner, discuss the extent to which the people have rights in a state governed by an absolute monarchy.

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DID YOU KNOW?

In Notre Dame cathedral, clergy were expected to sit to the right of the aisle, nobility to the left, and commoners at the back. The more rebellious commoners, however, seized benches at the front.

The Third Estate finds its voice

Up to this point, the revolt against absolute government had been led by the nobility in the Assembly of Notables and the Parlement of Paris and, because they were seen to be fighting against new taxes, they were depicted in the popular press and in the streets as defenders of the rights of the people. However, the declaration by the Parlement on 25 September 1788 that the Estates-General should be constituted as it was in 1614 radically changed public opinion. Overnight, the Parlement of Paris lost the support of the bourgeoisie and common people. To this point, the Third Estate had supported the aristocracy in its challenges to the King. Now the Third Estate suspected that the First and Second Estates simply wanted to appropriate power to themselves, not to fight for justice for the whole nation.

In 1614, when the Estates-General had last been called, each Estate had comprised a roughly equal number of deputies and had sat separately. They had discussed the issues presented to them and then voted on them. Each Estate had then voted as a whole on the issue: one vote for the First Estate; one vote for the Second Estate; and one vote for the Third Estate. As a result, the First and Second Estates could always outvote the Third and, as they had interests in common, they did.

Now the Third Estate demanded change. As its members represented more than ninety per cent of the population, they demanded a doubling in the number of their deputies to the Estates-General, from 300 to 600. Furthermore, they wanted voting by head, not by chamber or estate; that is, that the deputies to the Estates-General should sit as one body, with majorities to be decided upon the basis of the individual's vote. On 5 December 1788, the King announced his decision: he would grant double representation to the Third Estate, but did not make a decision on the issue of voting.

A Swiss journalist, Mallet du Pan, recorded the political controversy that arose as a result of the King's indecision, stating that

> The public debate has assumed a different character. King, despotism and constitution have now become only secondary questions. Now it is war between the Third Estate and the other two orders.[66]

66 Cited in Rees and Townson, *France in Revolution*, 22.

The cobbler Joseph Charon had much the same memories of the time, observing that

> from men of the world of the highest rank to the very lowest ranks through various channels ... people have acquired and dispensed enlightenment that one would have searched for in vain a dozen years earlier ... and they have acquired notions about public constitutions in the past two or three years.[67]

Not all voices were raised in support of change. A memoir to Louis XVI from the Princes of the Blood stated that

> the rights of the throne have been called into question; the rights of the two orders of the State divide opinions; soon property rights will be attacked; the inequality of fortunes will be presented as an object for reform; the suppression of feudal rights has been proposed ... May the Third Estate therefore cease to attack the rights of the first two orders; rights which, no less ancient than the monarchy, must be as unchanging as its constitution.[68]

The Princes asked that the Third Estate restrict itself to asking for changes to taxes and promised that, in return, 'the first two orders ... will, by the generosity of their sentiments, be able to renounce those prerogatives which have a financial interest.'[69] Thus, battle lines were being drawn between those who wanted their honorific privileges preserved, like the Princes, and those who called for fundamental changes to the way in which France was governed. One of these voices was the Abbé Sieyès.

The pamphlet war

By January 1789, elections for the deputies had commenced, *cahiers de doléances* (books of grievances) were being drawn up all over France and a 'pamphlet war' had begun. Outpourings of complaint, advice, rhetoric, political theory and enlightened ideas were available to the public in the over 4000 pamphlets published between May 1788 and April 1789. The debate was everywhere, from the salons of the wealthy and powerful to the cafés and taverns where the poor drank, in the churches and in the streets, from the heart of Paris to the provincial towns, villages and farms. This had resulted from the relaxation of censorship, in order that the people of France could discuss freely the electoral procedure for the Estates-General. A flood of words and images swept over France, as the public debated the issues surrounding the Estates-General and the state of France itself.

Of all of these pamphlets, the most powerful was that of Abbé Sieyès in his challenge to royal absolutism and the established order: *What is the Third Estate?* Produced over the last months of 1788, the priest's 20 000 word article became the most powerful and influential attack on the social and political order of France.

What is the Third Estate? A call to revolution

Sieyès challenged the old order of Estates and, with it, the system of privilege. Under the old order, the clergy and nobility were deemed to be more useful to the state than the Third Estate, because the First Estate ministered to the spiritual needs of the people and the Second Estate defended the kingdom.

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DID YOU KNOW?

The king's brothers and male cousins were known as Princes of the Blood. In Louis XVI's case they acted as both advisers and critics.

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DID YOU KNOW?

In its *cahier* the Third Estate of Bossancourt called for a law preventing horses and sheep from grazing together, on the grounds that horses needed 'healthy fodder, not infected by the bad breath of sheep and lambs.'

67 Cited in McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 38.

68 Rees and Townson, *France in Revolution*, 38–9.

69 Rees and Townson, *France in Revolution*.

The Pamphlet War 1788–89. New Pamphlets and Journals Poured from the Presses, Anonymous. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

An anonymous colour print showing one of the printing workshops which did enormous business in the early part of the Revolution.

After the announcement in May 1788 that there would be an Estates-General called in 1792, custom decreed that the King should relax the strict censorship laws so that issues pertaining to the Estates-General could be generally discussed. On 5 July 1788 the King invited 'all erudite and educated people' to send their opinions on the convocation of the Estates-General to the Keeper of the Seals. The result was an explosion of activity. People sought to enlighten not just the King but the whole nation, and they did not feel restrained by a lack of 'erudition.' Over 4000 pamphlets were published between May 1788 and April 1789 and the number of newspapers in Paris had increased to 250 by December 1789.

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DID YOU KNOW?

In the 1780s, French newspapers reached up to 500 000 people; most papers added to calls for political change.

LIBERTÉ DE LA PRESSE

Sieyès began with three powerful questions:

> What is the Third Estate? Everything
> What had it been before in the political order? Nothing
> What does it demand? To become something therein.[70]

He followed with a comprehensive attack on the privileged orders, pointing out that it was the Third Estate which both engaged in private enterprise and fulfilled public duties. Members of the Third Estate were the people who farmed, manufactured, sold and traded goods; furthermore, it was the Third Estate which provided every type of public service 'from the most distinguished scientific and liberal professions to the least esteemed domestic service.' And what of the privileged orders? They took 'only the lucrative and honorary positions,' wrote Sieyès, claiming that the utility of the privileged orders to the state was a myth because 'all that is arduous in such service is performed by the Third Estate.' For Sieyès, the Third Estate *was* the nation:

> Who, then, would dare to say that the Third Estate has not within itself everything that is necessary to constitute a nation? It is the strong and robust man whose one arm remains enchained ... Thus, what is the Third Estate? Everything, but an everything shackled and oppressed.[71]

These statements were a call to revolution. The issue was privilege and the battle ground was to be the Estates-General. 'Legalised privilege in any form,' Sieyès thundered, 'deviates from the common order ... A common law and a common representation are what constitutes one nation.' Sieyès called on the deputies of the Third Estate to take their rightful place as representatives of the people of France:

> What must the Third Estate do if it wishes to gain possession of its political rights in a manner beneficial to the nation? ... The Third Estate must assemble apart: it will not meet with the nobility and clergy at all; it will not remain with them, either by order or by head. I pray they will keep in mind the enormous difference between the Third Estate and that of the other two orders. The Third represents 25,000,000 men ... the two others, were they to unite, have the powers of only about 200,000 individuals, and think only of their privileges. The Third Estate alone, they say, cannot constitute the Estates-General. Well! So much the better. It will form a National Assembly.[72]

The challenge issued by Sièyes is echoed in the *cahiers* from all Estates, asking for political representation, the end of privilege, government responsibility to the people through regular meetings of the Estates-General and personal liberties. Its strongest influence comes from the ***philosophe*** of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose ideas on the liberty of the individual, law by 'general will' and government with the consent of the governed had been widely discussed among the literate French. In particular, Sieyès reiterated Rousseau's belief that 'a law not made by the people is no law at all.'

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70 Abbé Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?*, cited in Herbert Rowen, ed., *From Absolutism to Revolution:1648–1848* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 190.

71 Abbé Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?*

72 Abbé Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?*

73 John Gilchrist and William Murray, eds., *The Press in the French Revolution: A Selection of Documents taken from the Press of the Revolution in the Years 1789–1794* (Melbourne and London: Ginn & Cheshire, 1971), 5.

74 Cited in John Hall Stewart, *A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 42.

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ACTIVITY 18

Document Analysis

Read the document and complete the tasks that follow.

Abbé Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?*

The Third Estate wishes to have real representatives in the Estates General, that is to say, deputies drawn from its order, who are competent to be interpreters of its will and defenders of its interest. But what will it avail to be present at the Estates General if the predominating interest there is contrary to its own! Its presence would only consecrate the oppression of which it would be the eternal victim. Thus, it is indeed certain that it cannot come to vote at the Estates General unless it is to have in that body an influence at least equal to that of the privileged classes; and it demands a number of representatives equal to that of the first two orders together. Finally, this equality of representation would become completely illusory if every chamber voted separately. The Third Estate demands, then, that votes be taken by head and not by order.[74]

1. Suggest why Abbé Sieyès might have referred to the Third Estate as 'the eternal victim.'
2. In your own words explain the danger facing the Third Estate at the Estates-General, as suggested in the extract.
3. Identify **two** changes to voting procedures proposed by Sieyès.
4. Discuss the strengths and limitations of this document as a representation of the revolutionary forces at work in France in 1789.

The *cahiers*: historiography

In the spring of 1789, as the date for the first meeting of the Estates-General approached, *cahiers de doléances* or books of grievances were drawn up by the Estates in each electoral region to guide the deputies who would be sent to Versailles to advise the King. Some were conservative, like that of the First Estate of Bourges which asked that the Estates-General 're-establish the empire of morals, make religion reign, reform abuses, find a remedy for the evils of the state, be an era of prosperity for France and profound and durable glory for his Majesty.'[75] Others, like the *cahier* of the Third Estate of Paris were radical, enlightened and revolutionary. This *cahier* noted that

> In every political society, all men are equal in rights. All power emanates from the nation and may only be exercised for its well-being ... In the French monarchy, legislative power belongs to the nation conjointly with the King; executive power belongs to the King alone.[76]

This idea provides the foundation for the reformed monarchy which many hoped would be the outcome of the Estates-General. The Third of Paris had closely followed the model *cahier* written by the Society of Thirty, which was circulated in the country and gave local commoners, often largely illiterate, a framework within which to express their grievances. Thus, many Third Estate *cahiers* were remarkably similar in stating fundamental political grievances and then identifying very local problems.

In the eyes of Marxist historians, such as Rudé and Soboul, the Revolution can be seen as a class struggle, where the Third Estate challenged the aristocratic order for power. Notice how Rudé saw the Revolution proceeding in distinct phases and by separate classes:

> As we saw, the aristocracy, including the *parlements* and upper clergy, made a bid for extension of power in the noble revolt of 1787–8 ... By 1789 ... the main thrust of the 'aristocratic revolt' was past and it was now time for the two main other contenders – the bourgeoisie and the common people (peasants and *sans-culottes*) ... to make their own distinct contribution to the revolution that now took place.[77]

Similarly, Soboul attributed the Revolution to the bourgeoisie, arguing that

> a rising class, with a belief in progress, the bourgeoisie saw itself as representing the interest of all and carrying the burdens of the nation as a whole ... But the ambitions of the bourgeoisie, grounded in social and economic reality, were thwarted by the aristocratic spirit that pervaded laws and institutions.[78]

These interpretations differ significantly from that of Simon Schama, with his representation of the Assembly of Notables as 'the first revolutionaries,' intent on doing away with much of the old structure of France to bring about a more liberal political and economic regime.

The interpretations of Rudé and Soboul are also not supported by research into the *cahiers* themselves: of 282 *cahiers* from the nobility, ninety reflected liberal ideas. With regard to financial privileges, eighty-nine per cent were prepared to forego them and thirty-nine per cent supported voting by head. In general the noble *cahiers* showed a desire for change, were prepared to admit that merit rather than birth should be the determinant for high office and attacked the government for its despotism, injustice and inefficiency. In many cases they were more liberal than those of the Third Estate.[79]

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DID YOU KNOW?

On 17 March 1789 the King's cousin, the Duc d'Orléans, sent a letter to parishioners asking them to write *cahiers* in favour of property rights, equal taxation and the abolition of hunting rights. He said he wanted to be able to support 'with all his authority the well-founded grievances of his good vassals.'

75 Dwyer and McPhee, *The French Revolution and Napoleon*, 7.

76 Fielding and Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change*, 37.

77 Rudé, *The French Revolution*, 36.

78 Soboul, *A Short History of the French Revolution*, 5.

79 Rees and Townson, *France in Revolution*, 23.

Overall, the *cahiers* were remarkable for the level of agreement shown between the three orders over the expectation that the Estates-General would thereafter meet in a regular cycle and in the demand that the King, after disclosing the level of state debt, should concede to the Estates-General, or *nation assemblée*, control over income (taxation) and expenditure. The *cahier* of the nobility of Crépy asked that 'no tax or subsidy may be consented to except by the three Orders, and then only until the following session of the Estates General.'[80] There was general consensus that the Church should instigate reforms to stop abuses and to improve conditions for its parish priests. Surprisingly, it seemed to be generally accepted that there should be some form of fiscal equality – that the nobility and clergy would have to renounce, to some degree, their exemption from taxation. It was to be expected that the Third of Paris would call for the replacement of current taxes with 'general taxes born equally by citizens of all classes,' but the Clergy of Troyes agreed: 'Whatever the tax adopted, ... it shall be generally and proportionately borne by all individuals of the three orders,' although with the provision that there be 'consideration of the debts of the clergy.'[81] Similarly, it was recognised that the laws of the nation should be made uniform and more humane and that justice should be more freely available to all. Finally, the need to abolish internal customs barriers and to encourage internal free trade was widely agreed upon.

However, some clear differences emerged as indicators of the divisions to come. The clergy was not prepared to renounce the privileged position of the Gallican Church as the official church of the state: 'The Catholic, apostolic, and Roman religion shall be the only one taught, professed and publicly authorized; its services and teachings shall be uniform throughout the Kingdom,'[82] proclaimed the Clergy of Troyes. For the provincial nobles, Peter McPhee has claimed that 'seigneurial rights and noble privileges were too important to be negotiable, and from this came the intransigence of most of the 270 noble deputies elected to go to Versailles.'[83]

A high proportion of peasant *cahiers* were explicit in their targeting of absolutism, seigneurialism and taxation exemptions. Peter Jones, a specialist in the peasantry during the French Revolution, has alerted us to the problems this group faced in making its demands known. Meetings were often run by one of the peasants' major adversaries: the mayor or a seigneurial representative, or even the *seigneur* himself. Jones has given the example of the village of Pouillenay in the Auxois where two *cahiers* were submitted: the first called for constitutional and fiscal reforms in general terms, whereas the second, written later, contained a whole list of 'specific complaints' about seigneurial abuses. In the parish of Frenelle-la-Grande, the first *cahier* was written in advance and dated 8 March, a week before the meeting. On 26 March, twenty-five villagers signed a protest describing how they had been brow-beaten. Nevertheless, while model *cahiers* circulated in many rural districts, this does not imply that peasant grievances were necessarily watered down. Jones informs us that there is 'ample evidence to show that peasants were prepared to amend the documents submitted to them when they imperfectly coincided with local needs, and this notwithstanding the baleful presence of the seigneurial judge.'[84] In his study of a large number of parish *cahiers*, John Markoff has shown that over a third demanded the abolition of seigneurial rights without compensation. An additional forty-five per cent criticised the seigneurial system in either general or specific terms and over forty-two per cent wanted reform or abolition of various taxes. In comparing the peasantry's demands with those of the Third Estate in general, and those of the nobility, Markoff has observed

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DID YOU KNOW?

In 1790 the King's personal accounts were made public. Between 1774 and 1789 Louis spent twenty-nine million livres on his brothers, eleven million on himself and the queen, two million on salaries and pensions, and 254 000 livres on charity.

80 Cited in Fielding and Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change*, 36–7.

81 Fielding and Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change*, 36–7.

82 Fielding and Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change*, 37.

83 McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 41.

84 Peter M. Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 63.

that 'on the three great socio-economic issues of taxation, seigneurial rights and payments to the Church, the peasants were consistently the most radical and, unsurprisingly, the nobles the least.'[85]

Thus, the *cahiers* are important to the historian because they give a detailed view of the grievances of all groups in society. In France in 1789 they raised expectations of reform, which contributed to the development of a revolutionary situation.

The Society of Thirty

A Marxist interpretation also cannot account for the numbers of nobility, from both the sword and the robe, who played an active role in supporting the Revolution. Of these, in 1789 the most prominent role belonged to the Society of Thirty, the so-called 'conspiracy of well-intentioned men'[86] whose goal was to design a new constitution for France based on principles of the Enlightenment.

In late 1788 and early 1789, this group, which later formed the Constitutional Club, met twice weekly at the house of the *parlementaire* Adrian Duport, to debate the nature of representation to the Estates-General. Originally comprised of thirty members, it grew to about sixty members, of whom only five were commoners. The members of the Society of Thirty included the Marquis de Lafayette, the hero of the American War; the Duke de Noailles; the Duke de la Rouchefoucauld, who also had returned from the American War and was one of the highest members of the peerage; the Marquis de Condorcet, a noted *philosophe* and mathematician; Count Mirabeau, soon to be hailed as 'the voice of the revolution'; from the clergy, Bishop Talleyrand, Abbé Sièyes and Pastor Rabaut Saint-Etienne; and, finally, the journalist and diarist Louis-Sebastien Mercier, and the young radical Adrian Duport. Schama says that they were 'courtiers against the court, aristocrats against privilege, officers who wanted to replace dynastic with national patriotism.'[87]

The Society of Thirty embraced three principles. First, they rejected outright that there was some 'fundamental constitution' of France that the *parlements* had been attempting to conserve. Second, they believed that the only fundamental law was 'the welfare of the people.' Finally, they believed that as France had no constitution it was necessary to write one. The majority of members also believed that the Third Estate should have double representation because, as the Comte d'Antraigues and Sieyès argued, the state and people were one and the same: 'The Third Estate is not an order, but the nation itself.' This statement strongly reflected the ideas of the Enlightenment, with its concepts of law by 'general will' and the division of the powers of government.

Paris in early 1789 was caught up in a political fervour and a belief that, in calling the Estates-General, Louis XVI was committed to political, economic and social change. The *cahier* of the flower-sellers of Paris reflected this belief when it began:

> The freedom given to all citizens to denounce abuses that press on them from all sides to the representatives of the nation is doubtless a certain omen of impending reform.[88]

From all sides in the political debate, great hopes were placed in the deputies who made their way, in the spring of 1789, to the Palace of Versailles.

85 Cited in Andress, *French Society in Revolution*, 51.
86 Schama, *Citizens*, 299.
87 Schama, *Citizens*, 298.
88 Dwyer and McPhee, *The French Revolution and Napoleon*, 13.

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ACTIVITY 19

Visual Analysis

Look carefully at the representation and complete the tasks below.

1. Identify **two** features in the representation that suggest criticism of the relationship between social groups in pre-revolutionary France.
2. Identify **two** revolutionary ideas (not identified in Question 1) evident in the representation.
3. Using your own knowledge, explain the key specific events and developments that contributed to this view of the old regime.
4. Explain to what extent the representation presents a reliable view of the crises of the old regime. In your response refer to different views about the crises leading to the revolution.

France on the Eve of the Revolution.

Notes on image

Lowest figure riding: *Féodalité: Foi et homage du' au seigneur* – 'Feudalism: Loyalty and Homage owed to the Lord.'

Middle figure on his back: *Inquisition; Dîme, Bien du Clergé.*

'Inquisition' was the universally hated and feared Church court set up by Pope Gregory IX in 1233 to try French heretics called Albigensians or Cathars. It became powerful throughout Europe during following centuries.

'*Dîme*': a tenth, or tithe – a tax payable to the Church.

'*Bien du Clergé*': the wealth and property of the Church.

Upper figure: *Parlement; Assemblée des grandes du royaume* – Assembly of the Notables of the Kingdom.

Chains: reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous work *The Social Contract*, published in 1762. In it he said: 'Man is born free, and yet everywhere he is in chains,' i.e. chained up by the restrictions of government.

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ACTIVITY 20

Diagram

Create a diagram showing the challenges faced by the government of Louis XVI in the 1780s. Using colour, annotations, arrows and boxes, show the following elements:

- Long-standing problems and tensions;
- New problems and tensions;
- Economic crises;
- Political crises;
- Ideas that challenged divine right monarchy;
- Reforming and rebellious groups/institutions;
- Louis XVI's decisions (or lack thereof);
- Factors contributing to a revolutionary situation;
- The 'trigger' – the point at which the calling of the Estates-General became unavoidable.

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ACTIVITY 21

Paragraphs

Write **five** summary paragraphs addressing the tensions and conflicts that led to a revolutionary situation by 1789. See the list of guiding questions below.

Paragraph answers should commence with a strong topic sentence which answers all parts of the question. Explain your topic sentence with three or four separate points which contain strong factual information, consisting of precise names, dates, events and information about policies, proposals, decisions which escalated tensions and conflicts leading to a revolutionary situation by 1789.

Tensions = underlying long-term conditions

Conflicts = clashes of interest; short-term crises

Guiding questions (choose **five**):

1. Explain the chief characteristics of autocratic monarchy which created revolutionary tension prior to 1789.
2. How did *economic crises* contribute to the outbreak of revolution in 1789?
3. How did *fiscal grievances* contribute to pressure for revolutionary change in France in 1789?
4. How did *Necker's Compte Rendu* of 1781 contribute to a revolutionary situation in France by 1789?
5. How did *social grievances* of old regime France contribute to pressure for revolutionary change in 1789?
6. How did the *government's failure to reform* contribute to pressure for revolutionary change in France 1781–89?
7. How did the actions of the *Assembly of Notables* and *Parlement of Paris* contribute to pressure for revolutionary change between 1787 and 1789?

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ACTIVITY 22

Pair Work

With a partner, read about discussions over the establishment of a new Estates-General and answer the questions below.

1. In the Estates-General of 1614, what proportion of members came from each of the three Estates? How had votes been conducted?
2. What changes to representation and voting were proposed for the new Estates-General?
3. In your view, who would be most likely to benefit from the changes above and why?