**Sieyes and What is the Third Estate?**



A pamphlet summarising the contents of *What is the Third Estate?*, written by the Abbe Sieyes

Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyes, or the Abbe Sieyes, was born in southern France in 1748 and received an education in theology at the Sorbonne, France’s most noted university. He demonstrated more of a liking for the writings of Enlightenment thinkers, however, particularly those of John Locke. Despite his liberalism he entered the church and was promoted to the chancellorship of Chartres. He was not of noble birth though so further elevation eluded him, a fact that annoyed the talented Sieyes somewhat. In 1788 Louis XVI declared that the Estates-General would be recalled the following year; Jacques Necker issued a nationwide invitation for written expressions about the organisation of the Estates. Sieyes decided to put something together, and wrote the lines:

*What is a nation? A body of associates, living under a common law, and represented by the same legislature, etc. The Third Estate embraces all that which belongs to the nation; and all that which is not the Third Estate, cannot be regarded as being of the nation.
What is the Third Estate? It is the whole
What is the Third Estate? Everything.
What has it been heretofore in the political order? Nothing.
What does it demand? To become something.*

*“Sieyes – who had an ear for what we would now call the sound-bite – gave a notorious answer to this question [of political representation]. In contrast to the other two orders, the nobility and priesthood, which he claimed were guardians of their own corporate privilege, the Third Estate had ‘no corporate interest to defend… it demands nothing less than to make the totality of citizens a single social body.’ It was, he claimed, not one order amongst others, but itself, alone, ‘the nation': it was ‘everything’.”****Iain Hampsher-Monk, historian***

What he developed would become a pamphlet titled *Qu’est ce que le tiers etat?* (‘What is the Third Estate?’) that would become critical source of political ideas in the revolution. The demands made by Sieyes were not radical but they were insistent. The Third Estate, by far the largest sector of the population, should have due political representation. The appearance of the document in January 1789 earned Sieyes enormous popularity. He was consequently elected as a Third Estate representative at the Estates-General. It was Sieyes motion of June 17 that led to the Third Estate proclaiming itself as the National Assembly – however he was also instrumental in developing the distinction between active and passive voters in the new government, thus protecting the power and status of the bourgeoisie. Strangely, Sieyes was one of the few key leaders to survive the Reign of Terror and played a key role in the government of Napoleon Bonaparte.