# The Estates-General

The Estates-General had traditionally reflected the order of French society: three estates meeting with the King, the first two in full regalia and sitting either side of the monarch, while the Third Estate was forced to dress in black and then shoved to the rear, almost out of earshot of the main proceedings.

The voting system was also lop-sided with the assembly voting in blocks or “by order”, rather than individual conscience votes, “by head”. Under the existing system of voting, the First and Second estates would combine to outvote the Third Estate in almost all cases.

On its convocation in 1789 (the first in 175 years) the Estates-General adopted the same antiquated procedures. But the assembly did not reckon on the discontent in the lower estate, which now considered itself a significant body after pamphlets like ‘What is the Third Estate?’ by Sieyes.

Though it was represented in the Estates-General by the minority bourgeoisie, the Third Estate nevertheless saw itself as the majority of France – and thus the ‘true nation’.

Those elected to sit in the Estates-General were all wealthy enough to pay their own way, as this was a requirement; consequently no peasants or urban workers were present. Of the 610 representatives of the Third Estate almost half were venal office holders, while about 25 percent were professional lawyers and 13 percent were from trade and industry.

Although they had no significant leaders, no unity and little or no political experience, one of the first steps taken was the issuing of a demand that the Estates-General should meet as a single body and vote as a group, rather than as three Estates.

When this motion was denied by both the First and Second Estates, the Third Estate refused to take part until the Estates-General met in seance royale (or ‘royal session’, a full sitting of the king and all three estates). The king and his ministers failed to provide an effective response to this action; they did not take charge nor could they provide a suitable program or policy for discussion.

# Questions

Answers can be brief – this is to ensure you understand the concepts.

1. “…the Third Estate was forced to dress in black and then shoved to the rear, almost out of earshot of the main proceedings” List three events, ideas or movements that we’ve learnt about which meant the Third Estate was never going to tolerate this treatment in 1789
2. Define “Voting by order” and “voting by head”
3. Which voting system would each of the different estates have wanted and why?
4. What ideas caused the Third Estate to “see itself as the majority of France” and “The true nation”? Who came up with these ideas, and who popularised them in France?
5. Why were no peasants or urban workers sent as delagates?
6. What is the difference between Voting by Head, and Voting by Order?
7. Why would the Third Estate have wanted the E.G to meet as one body and vote by head rather than by order?
8. What do you predict will happen next in the revolution after the deadlock described in the final paragraph?