By the late eighteenth century, France was on the brink of revolution. The reasons had been building up over many years, and mainly concerned the great divide between the nobility and the clergy, and everybody else. The French population was divided into three estates. The First estate was made up of the clergy. It numbered around 100,000 people. The Second estate was made up of the nobility. It numbered around 400,000 people. The Third estate was made up of the bourgeoisie, wage earners, and the peasantry. It made up the majority of the French population.

The first and second estates enjoyed certain privileges that the third estate did not. Firstly, although they were the richest, they did not have to pay taxes. They were also the only members in society who could hold positions of importance such as Officers in the army. This caused great discontent within the Third Estate.

**KEYWORDS**

**Revolution** – a great change over a short period of time.

**Estates** – the class system in pre-revolutionary France.

**Bourgeoisie** – middle class.

**Nobility** – The upper class.

**Clergy** – The Church.

**Peasants** – The lower class, 90% of the population.

**THE THIRD ESTATE**

- Peasants were forced to do military service.
- Peasants could not hunt or fish on nobles’ estates.
- Peasants had to pay taxes to their lord, the king and the Church.
- Peasants had to use the lord’s mill, oven and winepress, and pay for them.
- Peasants made up 90% of the population.

**THE FIRST AND SECOND ESTATE**

- Nobles had almost complete authority over peasants.
- Nobles did not have to do military service.
- Nobles were exempt from most taxes.
- Nobles collected tolls from people using roads and markets.
- Many nobles and clergy lived in great luxury in chateaux and palaces.

The Kings, through their ministers and local officials RULED ABSOLUTELY. This meant that they had complete authority over France. The ‘parliament’ (States General) had not been called since 1614!

Psssst! Do you THINK it's fair? Which aspects of the French System might upset the Third Estate?
Tasks.

1) Look back at the information on these sheets. List the reasons why many people in France were critical of a) the nobility; b) the King; c) The clergy.

2) What might a French peasant have grumbled about in 1789?

3) Look at source A. Explain what point you think the cartoonist was making. Remember to explain the significance of the three characters, as well as the caption underneath.

4) How does the author of source B describe the lives of French peasants? (remember: it is not enough to say ‘good’ or ‘bad’ – you need to give examples from the source!)

5) Study sources A, B and C together. Do these sources explain why poor people in France resented the rich? Explain your answer using the sources.

6) Rousseau (source D) was an influential writer at this time. Along with other writers like Voltaire, he wanted France to have a more democratic form of government. Who would be most influenced by his words and why? (remember to include extracts from the source in your answer.)

7) The pamphlet which source D came from was banned in 1775. Why do you think this was? Which members of French society would want it to be banned?

EXTENSION 1
An extended piece of writing titled: ‘What was wrong with French Society in 1789?’ Refer to sources A-D, use keywords and your own knowledge in your answer.

EXTENSION 2
Design a poster to encourage members of the third estate to campaign for a fairer way. Include the reasons why people were resentful of the rich on your poster.