

History Summer Independent Learning - Unit 2: France in 1774

Task 1:

Use the notes below to create 5 Spider diagrams for each section below – this will help consolidate the position of France before the Revolution for our paper 2

Task 2:

Use your scheme of learning to rag rate your topics following your progression exams for paper 1 – Tudors.

1. Louis XVI, Absolutism and the Government of the Ancien Regime

A: Introduction: these notes give an in-depth description of the government of the ancien regime. Historians have often tried to explain why revolution broke out by analysing the way France was run before 1789. You will need to do the same as you cover this topic.

B: The Government of the Ancien Regime¹: France was governed very inefficiently. Theoretically the King had all the power (he was an 'Absolute Monarch'); but there were more limits to his power than this suggests. Local and regional government was governed in so many ways, by so many different authorities and this impacted on the King's ability to make changes and get things done.

(i) The King's Power: for many centuries France had been an absolute monarchy. In theory, the King held absolute power. He ruled by 'Divine Right'² and was answerable only to God. The Bishop of Meaux stated, "Royal Authority is sacred"³. This power was evident in many ways: the King was the lawgiver and the supreme judge. He had the sole power to appoint and sack the Ministers that ran the French government. There were 34 'Intendants' (each of them in charge of an area called a 'Generalite'⁴) who were appointed directly by the King and who were the instruments of the King's power throughout France. They supervised the collection of taxes, enforced law and order, and were responsible for public works. The king could imprison anyone without a trial (by issuing a 'Lettre de Cachet'⁵). There was no parliament to counterbalance the King's power. Theoretically the chain of command was simple, direct and plain enough- from the King downward.

(ii) Limits to the King's Power: the king could not, however, act despotically⁶. He was bound by laws and customs (e.g.: the law of succession), and many independent bodies had rights and privileges that the King was obliged to recognise and could not easily revoke. The shambolic way that France was administered also limited the power that the King actually wielded. Despite all this, strong Kings could still rule effectively; weak Kings often struggled.

Limits to the Kings power:

¹ Ancien Regime means 'old regime'- this term is used to describe France before Revolution broke it- it refers to the society, politics and economy at the time. You may come across phrases like, 'The society of the ancient regime' or 'Economic development during the ancient regime'

² Divine Right was a belief that the King had been chosen by God as his representative on Earth. Therefore to obey the King, was to obey God. Likewise to disobey the King, was to go against God.

³ Cited in Murphy et al., *Europe 1760-1871*, p49. 'Sacred' means 'holy'.

⁴ Obviously, it follows that France was divided in 34 Generalites. See Figure 1.

⁵ This was a sealed letter- 'cachet' means hidden and was used to refer to the seal used by the King. Once the recipient received the 'Lettre de Cachet', he or she was immediately imprisoned. See Figure 2.

⁶ A Despot is a King who acts in an arbitrary and illegal manner- doing what he wants, when he wants.

(a) Privileges held by various interest groups limited what the King could do: the nobility and the clergy held privileges, such as tax exemptions (see notes under The Estates System); the Pays d'états (areas that were added to France in recent times⁷) were not taxed either, but paid a 'don gratuit' (free gift); Parlements (which were high courts- NOT parliaments) were allowed to discuss and delay the King's edicts (although he could force their registration using a 'lit de justice'⁸).

(b) The chaotic nature of France's administration also placed an obstacle in the way of the King's authority:

(i) Finance- there was no central treasury and the crown was always in debt. The main tax was the taille (but this was not paid by the nobles or clergy). It was collected by venal accountants (men who had bought their offices and could not be sacked) they often abused the system. Fermiers Generaux (Tax 'Farmers') collected indirect taxes (examples- the gabelle- a tax on salt; aides- on food and drink; the octrois- on entering towns): they paid a lump sum in advance and collected tax revenues later (always making sure they made a huge profit)- this meant much of the tax collected ended up in their hands and never made it to the crown⁹.

(ii) Law- there was two types of law code: Roman Law was prevalent in the South; Customary Law in the North. The courts were slow, inefficient and corrupt. Nobles had the right to hold their own courts on their own lands (Seigneurial Courts): this amounted to nothing less than 'private justice'¹⁰.

(iii) Local Government: successive Kings created new structures for local government, but did not do away with the systems that they had inherited from their predecessors. Regional France was a mish-mash of differing, over-lapping authorities: there were 35 provinces, 135 diocese, 38 military regions and 13 Parlements- all of them were competing for influence. Intendants held considerable power (held via the royal prerogative) and tended to be intelligent, energetic and conscientious.¹¹ Every new policy was entrusted to them for execution. Sometime intendants found it difficult to push through change- they often had confusing (and contradictory) messages from central government; they were chronically understaffed (The Intendant of Brittany had just 10 clerks and secretaries under him) and they had to fight for influence with Provincial Parlements and Provincial governors. Provincial governors could call up troops (the Intendant couldn't) and they tended to be a higher status than Intendants (Princes, Dukes and Lords). In Pays d'Etats the provincial Parlement could bargain with the central government over the sum total of tax. They then decided on the tax distribution within their area of jurisdiction. Municipal government was also complex- no two towns held the same rights or customs. According to W Doyle it was 'inefficient and chaotic'.¹² Vacillation, uncertainty and inefficiency were built into the system and it proved nigh impossible to resolve emergencies or implement wide-ranging change.

⁷ See Figure 1: Areas that were completely under Royal Authority were called Pays d'Election (shown White on the map); The Pays d'Etat (Red on the map) had Parlements and therefore had most freedom from Royal rule; the Pays d'Imposition (Yellow on the map) were recently conquered areas)- they had retained many of their local institutions but they did have an Intendant who was able to impose Royal Taxation without interference from a Parlement.

⁸ This was a really bizarre ceremony and emphasises the 'medieval' nature of France's government. The King turned up at the Parlement that was refusing to register his law (this meant the law would not be valid in the Pays d'Etat that the Parlement administered). Once the King turned up, and sat in a throne under a canopy, the Parlement was FORCED to register the law. There is a drawing of a Lit de Justice in the figures section- Figure 3.

⁹ See Figure 4

¹⁰ This meant that the Lords used the courts to CONTROL peasants, rather than providing any genuine justice.

¹¹ This was largely because they tended to rise to prominence, building a successful career in the bureaucracy so they were not just Louis XVI's 'placemen'

¹² W Doyle, p63.

(iv) Economy: France was even divided into many different customs areas and different weights and measures were used throughout the country. We will do a full lesson on the economy of the ancien regime later.

(v) The Character of the King: a strong monarch was capable of effectively overcoming these obstacles and bringing in reform when necessary. Weak monarchs struggled. Clearly the success of the whole system of government was dependent on the character of the King.

C: What were Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette like?

Louis was born in 1754. Following the death of his father (in 1765) he became the 'dauphin'- the heir to the French throne¹³. In 1770 he married an Austrian princess, Marie-Antoinette. This marriage was unpopular from the start, as many Frenchmen and women blamed the Austrians for France's defeat in the 'Seven Years' War' (1656-1763). It took Louis three years to consummate the marriage and it took seven years of marriage to produce a son.

As a consequence, Marie-Antoinette was an unpopular figure. She was often referred to as 'l'Autrichienne' (that Austrian woman'). The fact that 'chienne' also means 'bitch' in French, only added to the insult. Marie-Antoinette was the target of a series of scurrilous pamphlets that suggested she was involved sexually with many lovers, including the King's brothers and other women. 'Le lever d'Aurore' pamphlet detailed the Queen's alleged night-time escapades.

D: How did Louis XVI govern?

In some ways Louis XVI was more ambitious than his predecessors- he wanted popularity and to rule 'benevolently', although he had little clear idea of how he might do this. According to E Hobsbawm, Louis XVI was weak and indecisive, clumsy and awkward, dominated by his ('feather brained'¹⁴) and arrogant wife, Marie-Antoinette¹⁵. He rarely left the Paris complex at Versailles (notably he went on a trip to Cherbourg in 1789) so was limited in his vision and his knowledge of France.

There was no cabinet government¹⁶ - the King met with each of his Ministers individually- they rarely if ever met altogether and very rarely worked with one another. This led to competition between Ministers (all trying to gain the King's goodwill) and led to factionalism in government.¹⁷ All of these ministers (except Necker) were drawn (as was tradition) from the nobility. Contemporary descriptions of the King's Council and the Privy Council demonstrate that Louis XVI's government shared his indecisive nature.

The historian Georges Lefebvre (1939) described Louis XVI as "lacking in will, honest and well-intentioned, he was far from being a great mind". Paul Hanson (2009) has suggested otherwise "...devoted to his subjects, committed to reform, more the victim of circumstances than his own failings."

2. Society- The Estates System

Society is a term used to describe the aggregate (total number) of people that live in a community so, when we use the term 'French society' we are describing all the different number of groups that lived in

¹³ 'Dauphin', quite literally, means 'Dolphin' in French. This is because the coat of arms of the 'dauphin' had a Dolphin on it! See figure 1.

¹⁴ Quote from E Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*

¹⁵ See Figure 5.

¹⁶

¹⁷

France. Frenchmen and women had been divided into three 'estates' since Medieval times¹⁸. Each estate held a different legal and social position within France. Individuals held different privileges or were subject to various burdens according to the status they held.

A: The First Estate.

Consisted of priests and bishops (there were roughly 130,000 of them in France). The Church held an immensely privileged position. It had enormous wealth, wielded influence over education, poor relief, hospitals and parish registers. It acted as an 'Information Ministry' in the Ancien Regime- passing on government dictums to the ordinary people. The Assembly of Clergy¹⁹ successfully resisted royal pressure and encroachments, ensuring that the Church escaped taxation and instead gave a 'Don Gratuit'.²⁰ It successfully fought off attempts to value Church property.

Its status as the First Estate cemented the importance of the Catholic Church into the social structure of France. The King was according to the Pope, 'The Most Christian King', showing how closely entwined the interests of the Church and the Monarchy had become.

The elections for the Estates General give an insight into the views of the clergy. There was unanimity on some subjects- education, the political position of the Catholic Church, (in)tolerance towards Protestants. Elsewhere these deliberations demonstrate that there was division within the Church. The lower clergy- the everyday priests (cures) had, hitherto, been unrepresented in Church assemblies. Of 303 First Estate delegates to the Estates General, 192 were parish priests. Many Regional electoral assemblies had seen bitter clashes between the lower clergy and the Bishops. The cures were frustrated at the behaviour of the bishops. It is notable that the ordinary Parish priests helped set the Revolution in motion when the 'crossed' to the Third estate during the Estates General (see later notes).

B: The Second Estate.

In 1790 there was between 110,000 and 350,000 lords in France (cf: just 220 noble families in Britain): about 0.5%-1.5% of the total population. They dominated French culture, politics, economy and society. They owned between a quarter and a third of all land; according to W Doyle, they were also bold and enterprising entrepreneurs, investing in commerce and even heavy industry.²¹ They also monopolised high-ranking positions in the Church, the judiciary and the army: they were Bishops, Intendants, Ministers, Magistrates and Generals.

The Second Estate held a series of legal privileges: they were exempt from the *taille personnelle* and military service; held feudal rights over the peasantry, held hunting and fishing rights and held their own law courts. In theory they were not permitted to engage in manual work or retail trade- nobility could be derogated (removed) although this was not often enforced in the eighteenth century (although breaking these restrictions did carry 'dishonour'). Because of this stigma, the *annoblis* (recently ennobled middle-class) were keen to abandon commercial interests and to live off investment ('to live nobly') in land, offices or *rentes*²².

The origin of the nobility was as a medieval military order and the '*noblesse d'épée*' (nobles of the sword) were those who could trace back an ancient lineage. This was the most prestigious group of nobles. In 1732 the edict, 'The Honours of the Court' permitted only those nobles who could trace back their ancestry back to 1400 to hunt with the king, or be presented to him. This court nobility were given lavish subsidies

¹⁸ See Figure 7

¹⁹ The main decision-making body of the French Catholic Church

²⁰ This means 'free gift' in French.

²¹ W Doyle, *The Origins of the French Revolution*, p111.

²² *Rentes* were government bonds- it worked like any investment, where the investor receives interest each year on the loan.

and rich sinecures by the King²³. The Segur Ordinance of 1781 attempted to limit army offices for those with four or more generations of nobility

The 'noblesse de robe' had bought a government office (venal offices) which conferred ennoblement. By the 1770s judicial and administrative careers were considered almost as prestigious as 'sword'. Louis XVI was lavish in his ennoblements: in the 1770s there were 4,244 civil offices that conferred ennoblement on the holder. Between 1725 and 1789 8,000 individuals were ennobled creating 40,000 new nobles (family members were ennobled too). This meant the Second Estate was an 'open' elite (if you could afford your way in!), absorbing the richest and most enterprising members of the Third Estate. The annoblis (those ennobled within their lifetime) tended to be the lowest in prestige- it took a few generations before the annoblis were properly assimilated into the 'robe'.

There were huge divisions of wealth in the Second Estate. The richest (about 250 families on 50,000 livres per year) were mostly 'old' nobles but about a fifth of them were 'new' financiers. These two groups readily mixed, much to the annoyance of poorer 'older' nobles. About 60% of the nobility had an income of less than 4,000 livres per year- which would permit them only a modest, frugal, lifestyle. About 20% lived on less than 1,000 livres: below most Bourgeois incomes and in-line with richer peasants: these 'noblesse hobereaux' were poor country nobles fallen on hard times²⁴. They tended to be hostile towards the 'robe' (plutocratic upstarts) and 'court' nobility.

The aristocracy was also divided in terms of culture. Enlightenment thought was not necessarily anti-noble (later events in the Revolution suggests it was). Mirabeau the Elder praised the 'thrift' aristocrat who tended his own lands, avoiding the temptation of Paris. Montesquieu believed that it was only the nobility that provided the resistance to royal despotism. Some Enlightenment thought criticised the nobility (like 'The Marriage of Figaro'), but it was the urban aristocrats (particularly in Paris) who flocked to see such plays and who bought seditious books and who were the chief consumers of Enlightenment thought. This influential minority were passionately interested in new ideas. Most aristocrats were, however, suspicious of the world of intellect. Regional Parlements often banned plays and books that challenged the status quo.

C: The Third Estate.

Was made up of everyone else in French society. This comprised of three main groups: the Bourgeoisie, the Peasantry and the Urban workers.

(a) The Bourgeoisie (middle class) numbered perhaps 1.7 million Frenchmen and women, making up 6% of the population. There was no national legal definition of 'Bourgeoisie'- the term literally means 'town-dweller'. In some towns and cities (e.g.: Paris) there was a legal definition (like a freeman in England) and special rights (like exemption from the taille) were accorded to these 'town-dwellers'. It is easier to define the Bourgeoisie by what they were not- they were not noble and they earned an income that was not dependent on the work of their own hands. This would, of course, mean the very richest peasants formed a rural Bourgeoisie: those who managed their lands in a more 'capitalistic' manner (see Peasantry- below).

The middle-class had become rich through non-traditional means: finance, investment, trade, industry and banking. These areas of the French economy had exploded in the years 1700-1789. They also counted

²³ A sinecure is a position requiring little or no work but giving the holder status or financial benefit.

²⁴ These three terms, in themselves, are useful for understanding the different types of lords- the 'Noblesse d'epee' were descended from the old warrior aristocracy of the Medieval era ('epee' means sword in French); the 'Noblesse de Robe' were a 'newer' form of lord- they were judges, magistrates, etc ('robe' means 'gown' in French- reflecting their robes of office); the terms 'hobereau' means 'squire' (the term squire is used to denote respect, but is used towards someone who is not considered overly superior to oneself).

professionals such as lawyers and doctors amongst their number. Their numbers had doubled in size since 1700, but they were not the dominant economic force in society (over 80% of 'wealth' was tied up in land).

Judged by their actions, the Bourgeoisie showed little 'class consciousness' before the advent of revolution. Although they were precluded from 'privilege' by the Estates System, few of them sought to challenge the way society was structured. Instead, many amongst the Bourgeoisie bought land or offices to gain noble privileges- see annoblis (above). This meant that they sought to improve their own position (as individuals) rather than taking political action that would improve their position as a class. In the 1770s and 1780s the price of venal offices soared- showing just how much the richer Bourgeoisie craved 'nobility'. This, of course, meant that there was a constant flow from the richer Bourgeoisie into the nobility. The Bourgeoisie abandoned the things that had made them Bourgeois (trade) to invest in land, offices or rentes. This process was the major engine of social mobility in pre-Revolutionary France: where the Bourgeoisie became 'annoblis'. According to Townson, "Bourgeoisie and nobles became part of a single properties elite. There was little bourgeois hostility towards the nobility before 1788"²⁵

There are, however, some traces of friction between the non-commercial Bourgeoisie and the nobility. A middle class man did not have to be too rich to be better off than many petty nobles. These nobles stressed their 'birth' (as nobles) to assert their superiority. There was also friction between the Paris Parlement (nobles) and the lesser judiciary (Bourgeoisie) and when Lamoignon sought to diminish the influence of the Paris Parlement (see later notes), the middle-class judiciary supported him.

Bearing in mind the Bourgeoisie numbered some 1.7 million there were bound to be differences amongst them. The petty (small) Bourgeoisie of a little town like Bayeux had little in common with the great industrial silk merchants and commercial lawyers of a large city like Lyons. Likewise, religion divided the Bourgeoisie- in Languedoc (in the South) the Catholic middle class sought to exclude the Protestant middle-class from political influence.

Some Bourgeois economic activities held greater prestige than others. The non-commercial middle-class (lawyers, office holders, rentiers²⁶) had most prestige; with 'rentiers' in particular, considered to be 'living nobly' as their income was derived from investments rather than trade or work. The Bourgeoisie that made money from trade or commerce were held in lower esteem in society.

Politically the Bourgeoisie (particularly away from Paris and in the smaller towns) tended to be 'conservative'- they accepted things as they were. Better education in the eighteenth century started to spread the ideas of the Enlightenment but, as with the nobility, this seems to have affected only a minority of the middle-class.

W Doyle suggests that some of the middle-class may have become increasingly disgruntled as the eighteenth century progressed: the Revolutionary ideals later espoused by the Bourgeoisie at the Estates General did not appear from nowhere. Partial government bankruptcies in 1770 and 1771 made rentes less reliable investments. There were fewer new venal offices and, as noted above, the cost of existing offices was soaring, nobles were also restricting access to certain posts- see the Segur Ordinance (above) and there were too many lawyers for all of them to make a decent living.

(b)The Peasantry was numerically the biggest group in French society. 80% of the population were peasants. They bore the brunt of taxes and dues: 40% of their income went to others (whether taxes to the King, tithes to the Church or 'dues' to their Lord). The word peasant is derived from the French 'paysan' which simply means country-dweller. It goes without saying that there was a big range of wealth,

²⁵ Townson, p17.

²⁶ Those that invested in Rentes.

status and outlook in such a big group of people (about 24 million in 1789). In general, though, there was little social mobility and life was a constant struggle for most peasants.

In eighteenth century society four sub-sets of the French peasantry can be identified:

(i) A very small number of them did prosper and had enriched themselves. These men and women either owned or sub-let land or grew crops on large-scale farms for the market.²⁷ They were indistinguishable from the rural bourgeoisie (the middle-class that had invested in land- see above). This group numbered some 600,000.

(ii) 'Labourers' were a subset of the peasantry who usually produced enough to make them self-sufficient (and sometimes produced a surplus to sell)- this group had done well in the eighteenth century.

(iii) Most peasants fell short of this: in a very good harvest year peasants could simply live off what they had produced, but more often than not, they had to labour (work) for others, weave, borrow or even migrate to towns or beg. Life was an unsure business for these peasants.

(iv) Landless peasants relied on selling their labour (i.e.: working for someone else). There were always at least several million landless peasants, although their numbers fluctuated according to economic conditions. The 'settled' peasants in the first three categories feared this section of society- seeing them as lawless vagabonds.

All peasants were affected by the major economic trends of the eighteenth century: population growth that created 'land hunger' and forced up rents, enclosure, a fall in real wages, a loss in supplemental income: weaving always fluctuated and wine production dropped, rising taxes, military service taking young men away from the land, the tithe. Economic conditions appear, in general, to have worsened for peasants in the period 1700-1789.

Peasants were also subject to feudalism. Only a tiny proportion of land was free from feudal tenure. Peasants were tried in 'private' seigneurial courts on their lord's land which meant they were not guaranteed impartial justice. The lord also held 'useful' rights which meant that he could extract fees when peasants hunted, used the flour mill, used ovens to bake or used the wine press. The lord also had 'honorific' rights which peasants often resented. The weight of feudal exploitation varied across the country: it was strongest in Brittany and Burgundy. It appears to have grown heavier as the century progressed- 'feudistes' (aristocratic agents) became more formidable in extracting as much as they possibly could from the peasantry. Increasing Bourgeois investment in land demonstrates just how much could be wrung out of the peasants- it nearly always reaped a tidy profit, regardless of how the economy did as a whole.

(c) Urban Workers: France contained few large towns and only Paris had a sizeable population of urban workers. Living conditions were poor, crowded and insanitary. The workers were unskilled and worked 16-hours a day 6-days a week. French industry was primarily on a small scale: workshops outnumbered large factories. Anti-combination laws prevented workers from acting collectively.

Paris had a population of 600,000 and, as you will see, exerted an undue influence over events during the Revolution. It had huge disparities of wealth. The city was segregated East to West: with the poorest in the east of the city. Work places tended to be small- workshops generally employed just 16-17 artisans.

There was about 100,000 members of guilds in 1776. They provided some worker protections and encouraged 'collective' action but were exclusive and many workers who could not gain membership

²⁷ Subletting means that they paid rent for the land and then parcelled it out, and charged more rent so that they made a profit on it.

resented them (there was jubilation when Turgot abolished them in 1776 and demonstrations when they were restored the following year).

Disorder was common in Paris. Strikes were frequent (and were, more often than not, defeated- either through the use of legal threats or force) and bread riots broke out when food prices outpaced wage rises: Parisians tended to threaten grain merchants, bakers and those that manned tax posts (who were all suspected of inflating the price of bread), rather than calling for increased wages. The authorities were very wary of the Paris populace and took action to both control and pacify them: the Parisian bread supply was prioritised over other areas and, from 1781, workers were forced to carry a livret in order to ensure their good behaviour.²⁸ There was a 2,000-strong Parisian police force and the government kept a regiment of French Guards (about 3,000 men) stationed in the city. These Guards were called on to stem rioting in 1787, 1788 and early 1789.

Paris was also subject to constant and mass immigration- about a sixth of the population at any one time is 'unknown' to history- itinerants who came and went, seeking work but never settling. The economic crisis of 1789 saw a particularly large influx, which only added to the squalor, begging and crime.

3. The Enlightenment, new ideas and Public Opinion

A: What was the Enlightenment?

Medieval thought had been dominated by theology²⁹. The Enlightenment is a general term that refers to new, more rational ideas that emerged from the seventeenth century onwards. The central nature of this movement was to enquire, analyse and criticise. Diderot stated, "Everything must be examined...shaken up without exception"³⁰

B: What were Enlightenment ideas?

The main target of Enlightenment 'Philosophes' was organised religion: they criticised monks, attacked church abuses and dismissed Catholic theology as 'superstition'. Absolute Monarchy was attacked on the same grounds. Enlightenment thinkers pilloried ideas like 'Divine Right' and 'The King's Touch'³¹. They wrote about the need to limit the King's powers and many looked towards the English constitution as an ideal.³² The leading Philosophes were not, however, revolutionaries: they sought reform rather than revolution. Enlightenment ideas included: subjecting all to the rule of law; to rule in the 'general good'; progress; efficiency; utilitarianism; better education; abolition of torture; humanitarianism; a free press and emancipation.

The French also drew Enlightenment ideas from the newly liberated American colonies. The events in the USA showed that a new healthier society could be constructed- an example of a whole people dedicating itself to liberty and equality.

²⁸ A livret is a small book- instances of misconduct were recorded by the employer in the livret. Theoretically, a worker could not be employed unless he or she presented their livret. Workers holding livrets containing negative comments were less likely to find work.

²⁹ Theology is the study of 'God' and religion. You will know the root of this word from your work on 'Theists' and 'Atheists' in WFLC.

³⁰ Cited in D.Murphy et al., op cit., p24.

³¹ According to Medieval Theological thinking, the King was able to cure various ailments (notably a skin disease called 'scofula'- sounds nice!) just by touching the patient. The King was said to have 'Thaumeturgical Powers'. This idea obviously relates to the belief that the king was chosen by God and ruled by 'Divine Right'.

³² In England the King reigned but didn't rule- he had barely any power and the country was run by a Parliament that was elected by a wealthy, male, elite.

Ideas did, however, spread beyond the elite, and were spread in less respectable ways. For example, Enlightenment figures talked about limiting the power of the Absolute Monarchy: this idea spread and mushroomed into general disdain for the King, Queen and the Court: scurrilous pamphlets attacking leading figures (particularly Marie-Antoinette) were published in great numbers and circulated throughout the cities.³³ The historian Darnton suggests that this criticism became more radical and irreverent in the 1760s and 1770s³⁴. The Diamond Necklace Affair (1785) saw the Queen scorned when she was inadvertently involved in a scam regarding a 2,000,000 livre necklace. What more it seemed typical of her frivolous extravagance, in a time of hardship for many and financial crisis for the monarchy (see later notes on economy). Doyle asserts that as a result of the opprobrium piled on the Monarchy, public confidence in the way that France was governed collapsed almost completely

C: How widespread were the ideas of the Enlightenment?

It seems that it was the nobility who were the most enthusiastic adherents of these new ideas: particularly the members of the various Parlements (High Courts) and those who frequented the fashionable salons of Paris³⁵. Diderot's Encyclopaedia sold well amongst the military nobles and the professional Bourgeoisie (the social groups that were most active in 1789).

Enlightenment ideas did spread beyond these elite groups. By 1789, 63% of the population were still illiterate (compared with 79% a century earlier). The growth in literacy led to a marked expansion in the book trade. It is certain that Parisians were better informed about Enlightenment thought than other Frenchmen and women. In 1777 Paris had its first daily newspaper. In 1785 82 periodicals were published. The salons of Paris were the centres of political and cultural life for the very richest. The Palais Royal (owned by Philippe, Duke of Orleans) was the nerve centre for new ideas. Philippe opened up the palace grounds to ordinary people

The cost of published materials was beyond the reach of all but the comfortably off. Private literary societies proliferated and membership subscriptions gave members access to books and journals that they otherwise could not afford. Attempts were made at censorship (either through heavy taxes or a straight-forward ban) but both national and regional officials were wading against a deluge of publication.

As a result the late 1780s saw an increase in 'informed' public opinion. This was recognised by the government and administrative bodies of France- the Parlements published their (supposedly private) remonstrances; Turgot and Necker both published accounts to appeal for public support for their measures. On his accession in 1774, Louis XVI restored the suppressed Parlements in order to win favour with the public. By the 1770s public opinion had become a powerful factor in framing political debate.

D: What impact did the Enlightenment have?

According to Townson, the influence of the leading Philosophes (Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot) "made reform seem not only desirable but necessary"³⁶. Other historians are less convinced that their influence was that strong

Marxist historians have tended to depict the Enlightenment as a build-up of ideas that swept away the ancien regime- a programme for revolution. It is possible to piece together a revolutionary ideology by

³³ The Queen was a keen gambler and, in these pamphlets, was alleged to have had several affairs (including some of a lesbian nature).

³⁴ Darnton is cited in Doyle, p 38.

³⁵ Salons were bars where thinkers gathered to drink and discuss ideas. Some forward-looking aristocrats held private salons, where they invited selected thinkers for these discussions.

³⁶ D. Townson, *France in Revolution*, p11.

cherry-picking from the writings of the philosophes. This does not, however give a true picture of the general tenor of the Enlightenment- philosophes tended to advocate reform rather than revolution.

Cobban claims that the government, itself, also appears to have been 'infected' with Enlightenment ideas- the impetus for reform came from establishment figures like Turgot, Calonne and Brienne (see later notes on the Economy and the Financial Crisis).

There does also appear to have been an impact on the behaviour of ordinary people. Anti-clerical sentiment became more commonplace- attacks on the Church were applauded and Church forays into politics were unpopular; there was a growth in religious toleration; the number of pious bequests dropped.

Montesquieu defined despotism in his 'Esprit des Lois' ('The Spirit of the Law') and helped make it undesirable. Despot became a general term of abuse. The Paris Parlement was able to play on this, in its tussle with the government. Public Opinion came to reject reform (even though desirable) if it emanated from despotism (see late notes on the tussle between the government and the Parlement).

The cahiers drawn up in preparation for the Estates General suggest that the spread of the Enlightenment was limited to Paris and the major urban centres. Most of the public adopted a conservative approach to change and that new ideas confused the general public (rather than giving them clarity).

F: To what extent did the Enlightenment cause the Revolution?

The historian, Daniel Mornet, studied the diffusion of books and ideas: he says that this spread disillusion with the 'old order' and that it was not countered or suppressed by the government of the ancien regime. He claims, however, that they were not widespread enough to cause revolution and the ideas, in themselves were not particularly dangerous or malignant.

Francois Furet believed the ideas generated by Enlightenment thinkers did help to cause of Revolution, Baker³⁷ built on this by studying 'secondary thinkers' (not the main philosophes like Voltaire and Rousseau) as he believed they better reflected what 'ordinary' members of society said and thought. Darnton claimed that the Enlightenment had 'triumphed' in France and was widely accepted amongst the educated elite. He went on to claim that 'second rate' thinkers (like Brissot and Marat) only turned to Revolution because they remained relatively obscure and ignored under the Ancien Regime. Habermas said the Enlightenment loosened the monarchy's control over what its subjects thought- it created a 'space' for them to think, read, meet and criticise. According to Roger Chartier the Revolution only became possible when it became 'thinkable'.

As a result of Enlightenment debates the idea of what constituted the 'nation' was redefined. Louis XVI's great, great grandfather was able to claim "Je suis l'etat" (I am the state) and this went unchallenged. Rousseau's social contract (1762) raised the issue of 'sovereignty' and he called for a representative body (a parliament) to 'channel' the views of the nation. Clearly this countered the idea that the King was the state.

Some Marxist historians believe that Enlightenment ideas constituted a middle-class modernisation wish-list. Lefebvre claimed that the Enlightenment was the ideology of the bourgeoisie- utility, rationality and individualism- that had been clarified by the philosophes. Richet supports this- he says the Enlightenment gave the propertied elite political theory to wield against the Ancien regime.

Doyle³⁸ counters this assertion. He shows that in the ancient regime the Bourgeoisie were as divided on the Enlightenment as the nobility (and that an interest in new ideas was a minority pursuit amongst both groups). Doyle goes on to claim that all this changed with the discussions on the 'form' of Estates General

³⁷ Cited in W Doyle, p36

³⁸ Doyle, p128

(Sept 1788 to June 1789) and Enlightenment ideas raised 'some form' of class consciousness in the Bourgeoisie, that they now saw themselves as a key part of the political nation and that the ideas coalesced into a force that drove France into Revolution.

4. The French Economy

A: A description of France's Economy

France's had the second largest economy in Europe (after Britain), this was largely because France had a much bigger population than other European countries. French thinkers saw Britain's economic development and worried about France's lack of progress.

(i) Industry: Industrialisation was slow to develop in France. Britain was rapidly industrialising at the time. Britain had 20,000 spinning Jennies (France just 1,000); 9,000 mules (France had 0) and 200 mills (France had 8)³⁹. Manufacturing was carried out in small workshops rather than large factories.

(ii) Maritime Trade: had expanded throughout the eighteenth century. France's ports were thriving Marseilles held a monopoly over trade with the Levant⁴⁰; Nantes and Le Havre had grown rich on trade with the Caribbean.

(iii) Agriculture: was backward and traditionalist in most areas. Between 1730 and 1760 prices, rents and production had all grown- but this was down to greater tillage rather than higher productivity levels or greater yields.⁴¹ Population pressure led to an increase in vagrancy and in the number of itinerant workers. In the 1770s and 1780s there was a succession of poor harvests and a general slump in wages and an increase in prices. This contributed to a severe agricultural slump and had knock-on effects in the rest of the economy.

B: Economic causes of the revolution.

Historians have long-debated the impact of economic causes of the Revolution. Many believe that the economic crisis of the late 1780s, worsened the living conditions for all but the wealthiest in society and drove the hungry masses to take up arms; directly bringing about revolution. Others have questioned whether the economy was 'backward' and have therefore, sought to minimise the impact of economic factors as a cause of revolution.

Labrousse undertook a mammoth investigation into the economy. He found that between 1730 and 1770 there were rapid advances: good harvests, a rising population, rising prices and growth in overseas trade. Conversely between 1770 and 1778 there was a series of bad harvests that afflicted the rest of the economy.⁴² This culminated in the catastrophic harvest of 1788 which caused a steady rise in grain prices and set off a huge industrial slump, with production dropping by as much as 50%. The fall in wages and rise in prices drove many to penury.

Weir challenged this narrative on the industrial slump- he claims it was not linked to the agricultural crisis. Instead he focussed on Calonne's 1786 commercial treaty with Britain- he claims that this caused the industrial slump as French industry was wiped out by cheaper, better quality British imports.

³⁹ Spinning Jennies and Mules (despite their names) are items of machinery used in textiles factories. A 'Mill' is just another term for a factory.

⁴⁰ The Levant is the area that is covered by modern-day Israel and Lebanon.

⁴¹ Basically this means they were farming a larger area (more tillage) rather than growing more in the same space (higher productivity; higher yields).

⁴² Food costs were the biggest expense that most Frenchmen and women faced. If bread prices rose- they ended up spending even more of their income just feeding themselves and their families. This meant that they had less to spend on other products (e.g.: clothing) and so when food prices rose, demand for textiles dropped. As a result textiles workers had their wages cut or were made unemployed. In this way a bad harvest damaged the WHOLE economy.

Either way (and the truth may lie somewhere between both theories), the economy tanked and the lack of agricultural revolution, coupled with disastrous harvests and the deleterious effects of the commercial treaty created the economic conditions conducive to unrest.

Toutain challenged the idea that France did not experience agricultural innovation- he pointed to the rising population and claimed that agricultural productivity increased on the back of technical improvements.

On the other hand, Morineau's research showed there was no significant change. He claimed that population growth only occurred because the eighteenth century began because the agricultural economy started off 'below capacity'.

C: The Economic Crisis

In 1788 there was a disastrous harvest almost everywhere. This was against a backdrop of worsening economic conditions. The previous 20 years had seen more bad years than good. Between 1720 and 1789 real wages fell 7%. Peasants had taken to growing grapes (for sale, for wine) but the 1780s saw a series of poor grape harvests.

The poor harvests had knock-on effects on the rest of the economy, but particularly textile production (which was the largest 'industrial' sector)- it saw a 50% drop in production. The 1786 Commercial treaty also hit textiles. Nemours (Calonne's advisor) had hoped that this treaty would open up Britain to French agriculture. Instead, France was flooded with English goods.

On 17 Aug 1788 (the day after the government went bankrupt) the price of bread began to rise from a base of 9 sous, by February it had reached 14½ sous and by the spring, bread absorbed 88% of Parisian workers' wages.

Only overseas trade resisted the slump. Bordeaux saw its greatest volume of trade in 1789 9th year of Revolution). This sector, though, only formed a tiny proportion of the economy as a whole, so most Frenchmen and women were untouched by the boom in trade.

Calonne and Brienne both lifted restrictions on the grain trade. This, however, coupled with the mediocre harvests made supply less certain and led to food riots. Necker resurrected the controls until 1787 (when he abandoned them- there had been an abundant harvest). He reintroduced them in August 1788, but this failed to prevent the spread of riots: in Brittany (January), Flanders and Provence (March), Dauphine, Languedoc and Guienne (April) and Paris (in May). Tension always rose in line with prices rises and the fear of the 'soudure' (the gap between one year's supply- usually exhausted in May; and that year's harvest- in August). The Reveillon riot (in Paris in April) was sparked by the simple suggestion that wages could be cut if the price of bread was reduced.

The Cahiers for the Estates General were drawn up in the febrile atmosphere created by these economic hardships. The Estates General itself met in a background

5. The Financial Crisis and attempts at Reform

A: Overview

The years before 1789 saw the French crown experience increasing financial difficulties, the level of debt was unsustainable. The crown's finances were shambolic. On his accession (in 1774), Louis XVI had inherited huge debts piled up from France's involvement in the Seven Year's War (1756-1763). Most tax revenues went immediately to pay off the interest on this debt. The court was seen as profligate and extravagant. The King appointed and sacked four different finance ministers; each attempted to overcome the crown's crippling levels of debt and year-on-year deficit. Ultimately it was the monarchy's financial problems brought about Revolution. The calling of the Assembly of Notables and the Estates General was a

direct consequence of these difficulties. It was the Estates General that dismantled the political and social structures of the ancien regime.

B: Turgot, 1774-1776

Turgot was a 'physiocrat'.⁴³ He believed in reform (Turgot, Necker and Calonne were all heavily influenced by Enlightenment ideas) and set out to modernise trade, maximise tax yields and cut spending to control the deficit. However, he held the view that the king had the right to force through any reform he saw fit, whatever the opposition (this could be termed 'enlightened political absolutism'). Unsurprisingly, it was opposition to his reforms that ended his career.

On appointment, Turgot inherited a desperate financial position. His first act was to submit to the king a statement of his guiding principles: "No bankruptcy, no increase of taxation, no borrowing". To meet these aims, he decided to cut spending. He also started to reduce the number of venal offices. He prepared a regular budget. Turgot's measures succeeded in reducing the deficit, and he raised the national credit to such an extent that in 1776, just before his fall, he was able to negotiate a loan with some Dutch bankers at just 4% interest.⁴⁴

Turgot tried to improve agricultural production by establishing free trade in grain. His edict was signed by the King on 13 September 1774, but it met with strong opposition. The poor harvest of 1774 led to a slight rise in the price of bread. In April 1775, Northern France saw a series of food riots (known as the 'Flour War'); the Paris Parlement condemned his policy.

Turgot also planned to create a pyramid of new municipal, district and regional assemblies to administer the tax system⁴⁵ and see to poor relief and to education. Louis XVI felt these plans were too ambitious so they were never given the king's support.

Turgot also opposed France's involvement in the American War of Independence. Although he supported the aims and ideals of the Americans, he wanted to avoid the cost of war.

He also attempted to reform the corvée⁴⁶ and the restrictions imposed by guilds.⁴⁷ He managed to get his edicts registered by the lit de justice; but his attacks on these privileges had won him the hatred of the nobles and the Parlements. Ministerial rivalry led directly to his fall. Necker and Maurepas both took advantage of Turgot's unpopularity and briefed the King against him. He was dismissed in 1776.

C: Necker, 1776-1781.

Jacques Necker attempted some reform but his key policy was to borrow and spend- he believed this would create 'confidence' and this would solve the financial crisis. He was sacked when his enemies at court convinced the king he was over-ambitious.

Necker raised 520million livres between 1777 and 1781- they were short-term loans at high rates of interest (as high as 10%). As a result, Necker managed to finance France's contribution to the American War of Independence (France spent 1066 million livres) war with no new taxation.

⁴³ Physiocrats believed wealth was created by agriculture- the working of land. This was the basis of the economy- when it did well, the country did well. They believed all other economic activity (including industry and trade) were based on agriculture and these areas only prospered when agriculture did.

⁴⁴ Interest went up and down, depending how creditworthy the borrower was. The crown's credit was so poor, that they were sometimes charged 10% for loans

⁴⁵ Look back at your early notes to see the inefficiencies in tax collection

⁴⁶ Corvée- peasants were forced to work (for free) repairing roads in their Lord's lands.

⁴⁷ Guilds were organisation that controlled production and trade. For example, it was not permitted to set up a business, making and selling gold jewellery, unless you were a member of the Goldsmiths' Guild.

In 1781 his 'Compte Rendu'⁴⁸ showed a surplus in 'ordinary' accounts. In this document, Necker summarised governmental income and expenditure, giving the first-ever public record of royal finances (he had it published for the general public). The statistics given in the 'Compte Rendu' did not give the whole financial picture. Necker wanted to show France in a strong financial position, so he hid the crippling interest payments that France had to make on its massive 520 million livres in loans (he referred to this as 'extraordinary' spending-and, so excluded it from the account). As a result, amongst the French public, Necker earned the reputation as a financial miracle-worker: the figures from the 'Compte' appeared to show that he had solved the French crown's financial crisis with no need for reform, no higher taxes, and no cut in expenditure.

Necker continued Turgot's policy and abolished more venal offices and began to start a centralisation process. He tried to bring in greater scrutiny over the management of tax collection: bringing it into the hands of professional administrators who could be controlled by central government.⁴⁹ In 1778, Necker introduced 'administrations provinciales' (members chosen rather than elected) to assist intendants, but only two were established before his fall. He hoped this would maximise tax revenues, bringing in more income to wipe out the annual deficit and start to pay off the loans.

Like Turgot, Necker's dismissal was also brought about through factional intrigue at court. Traditionally, Necker has been heavily criticised by historians- financing American war with loans, his 'dishonest' 'Compte Rendu'; doubling the representation of the Third Estate and 'disappearing' when things got difficult at the Estates General.⁵⁰ Some historians have tried to rehabilitate his reputation, claiming that his reforms were sensible and Calonne was wrong to abandon them. This attempt at rehabilitation has never really gained traction

D: Calonne, 1783-87.

On his appointment in 1783, Calonne found 'All the funds were empty...alarm was general and confidence was destroyed'. He spent on 'useful splendour' to bolster confidence and hide government vulnerability; this allowed him to bolster confidence and to raise 422m livres in loans. Concerns grew, though, and the Paris Parlement protested against Calonne's borrowing in Dec 1784 and 1785. An economic crisis in 1786 (a culmination of a decade of difficulties) saw tax yields drop dramatically. This led to the bankruptcy of a number of the crown's chief financiers.

Calonne responded by undertaking a financial audit- it took ages to prepare because there was no central treasury, no annual budget, officials (like Fermiers General) were only obliged to send periodic accounts to the crown's auditors.

On 20 August 1786 Calonne admitted, to the King, that crown was on verge of bankruptcy- the cost of servicing the debt⁵¹ took up 1/2 of the yearly revenue. Financial difficulties were nothing new- successive kings had overspent on war, but France's involvement in the American War of Independence tipped long-standing problems over the edge.

What options did Calonne have?

1. Cut spending- this was difficult because of the amount of revenue that debt took up- in 1776 even the 'severe' Turgot could only find 34 million in savings

⁴⁸ This means 'Account given..', the fully title was 'Account given to the King', hence this shortened title.

⁴⁹ Again, see earlier notes on Tax Farmers- this will help you understand what Necker was trying to change.

⁵⁰ See later notes for the doubling of representation and his vanishing act!

⁵¹ 'Servicing the debt' means paying off the interest.

2. Increase taxes- the third vingtieme was due to expire in 1786 but the Parlements were already complaining about tax burdens (this is why Necker had decided to borrow rather than tax more).

3. Bankruptcy- was considered dishonourable (even successive revolutionary regimes honoured the debts of their predecessors) and diminished the ability to raise further loans.⁵²

4. Borrow- but French govt loans were already more expensive than Britain's or the Dutch. France had no publically-supported bank. In 1776 'caisse d'escompte' was set up but was taken over by speculators by 1783 it was bankrupt.⁵³ Government often had to rely on intermediaries to borrow on its behalf (e.g.: the municipality of Paris, the Estates of Brittany). Borrowing more was hardly the answer.

Once his audit was complete he presented his 'Summary of a Plan for Improvement of Finances', which proffered a plan to reform the economy, government and society of France. Louis XVI was 'staggered' by the plan

Calonne's Plan

1. Expand the crown's revenues by recasting the tax system: replace the vingtiemes⁵⁴ with a land tax (no exemptions), to be assessed and administered by new provincial assemblies under the supervision of the Intendants; new stamp duty; efficient management of the royal domain.

2. Stimulate the economy- abolition of internal customs barriers; abolish the corvee and replace with tax; free trade in grain (both internal and import-export)

3. Short-term fixes- raise loans, increase 'confidence' by calling an 'Assembly of Notables' that would assent to the changes, outflanking opposition in the Parlements (who had opposed his loans in 1784 and 1785).

Calonne did not expect opposition from the Assembly of Notables: he felt his measures were 'sensible' and intended to hand-pick the delegates, anyway. The convocation of the Assembly was announced on 29 Dec 1786.

The historians Lefebvre and Goodwin have looked favourably on Calonne and his reform plan of 1787. Goodwin believed that Calonne was the one man who could have resolved the financial disorder that overwhelmed the ancien regime.

⁵² Declaring bankruptcy meant that the government could no longer pay its loans and those that had lent money (the creditors) would lose out. This would act as a huge disincentive for anyone considering offering the government another loan.

⁵³ This was an attempt at setting up a National Bank (like the Bank of England).

⁵⁴ A vingtieme was a 'twentieth'- tax payers had to pay 5% of their income as a tax.