

Answer the question below in an essay format by applying your knowledge of the era and by making a direct reference to the accompanying primary source documents.

## Why was France on the brink of revolution in 1789?

### Document A

#### From Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, 1762

*The political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau published The Social Contract in 1762. The work was highly controversial at the time and was banned by the French authorities.*

Since no man has any natural authority over his fellow men, and since force is not the source of right, conventions remain as the basis of all lawful authority among men.

So soon as the people are lawfully assembled as a sovereign body, the whole jurisdiction of the government ceases, the executive power is suspended, and the person of the meanest citizen is as sacred and inviolable as that of the first magistrate, because where the represented are, there is no longer any representative.

These assemblies, which have as their object the maintenance of the social treaty, ought always to be opened with two propositions, which no one should be able to suppress, and which should pass separately by vote. The first: "Whether it pleases the sovereign to maintain the present form of government." The second: "Whether it pleases the people to leave the administration to those at present entrusted with it."

(Source: J-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 1762)

### Document B

#### A Peasant Carrying a Prelate and a Noble on his back, c. 1780

*In this satirical drawing a peasant farmer is depicted struggling to carry a nobleman and a prelate on his back whilst working in his field. The caption reads "One hopes this will end soon."*



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## **Document C**

### **From Arthur Young's book *Travels in France*, 1792**

*The Englishman Arthur Young travelled around France in the years preceding the Revolution. In this excerpt, dated September 5, 1788, he describes the poverty of the peasant class in France during this period.*

The poor people seem poor indeed; the children terribly ragged, —if possible, worse clad than if with no clothes at all; as to shoes and stockings, they are luxuries. A beautiful girl of six or seven years playing with a stick, and smiling under such a bundle of rags as made my heart ache to see her. They did not beg, and when I gave them anything seemed more surprised than obliged. One third of what I have seen of this province seems uncultivated, and nearly all of it in misery. What have kings, and ministers, and parliaments, and states to answer for their prejudices, seeing millions of hands that would be industrious idle and starving through the execrable maxims of despotism, or the equally detestable prejudices of a feudal nobility.

(Source: A. Young, *Travels in France*, 1792)

## **Document D**

### **From the list of grievance of Aix-en-Provence, 1789**

*A list of grievance was drawn up by local parish assemblies during the selection of Deputies for the Estates-General. This list addresses the king directly.*

...in our current constitution, only nobles enjoy all prerogatives like landed wealth, honours, dignities, graces, pensions, retirements, responsibility for government, and free schools. . . . These [privileges] constitute the favours the State lavishes exclusively on the nobility, at the expense of the Third Estate [the commoners].

The nobility enjoys and owns everything, and would like to free itself from everything. However, if the nobility commands the army, the Third Estate makes it up. If nobility pours a drop of blood, the Third Estate spreads rivers of it. The nobility empties the royal treasury; the Third Estate fills it up. Finally, the Third Estate pays everything and does not enjoy anything.

If only you knew, Sire, how much sweat, how many tears soak the money going into your treasury? Without doubt, your kindness will be more on its guard against people's indiscreet requests who consume in one day the fruits of taxes from thousands of your poor subjects.

## **Document E**

### **Attack on seigneurial dues decreed by the General Assembly of Lignère la Doucelle, March 1789**

*Seigneurial dues were obligations owed by the peasant class to the nobility in return for protection and administration. However in March 1789, the local community of Lignère la Doucelle complained that the dues were becoming too excessive.*

For a long time now, the inhabitants have been crushed beneath the excessive burden of the multiplicity of taxes that they have been obliged to pay.

That all lords, country gentlemen, and others of the privileged class who, either directly or through their proxies, desire to make a profit on their wealth, regardless of the nature of that wealth, pay the same taxes as the common people.

That all seigneurial fees be abolished. Or at least that several of them be grouped together, for which each seigneur [Lord], for a limited time, can appoint an officer, failing which the king will provide him one.

## **Document F**

### **From Joseph Sieyes' pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?*, 1789**

*Abbé [Abbot] Sieyes, wrote his pamphlet before the Estates-General had been called together. The pamphlet criticized noble privileges and as a result, Sieyes was elected as a Deputy for the Third Estate in the Estates-General.*

Who then shall dare to say that the Third Estate has not within itself all that is necessary for the formation of a complete nation? It is the strong and robust man who has one arm still shackled. If the privileged order should be abolished, the nation would be nothing less, but something more. Therefore, what is the Third Estate? Everything; but an everything shackled and oppressed. What would it be without the privileged order? Everything, but an everything free and flourishing. Nothing can succeed without it, everything would be infinitely better without the others.

What is the Third Estate? It is the whole.

*(Source: Abbé J. Sieyes, What is the Third Estate?, 1789)*

## **Document G**

### **The King of France's speech on the opening of the Estates-General, May 9, 1789**

*In May 1789, Louis XVI opened the Estates-General, an assembly of the First Estate (the clergy), the Second Estate (the nobility) and the Third Estate (the commoners) to discuss France's deepening financial crisis. Despite Louis's call for unity the Estates-General was abandoned in favor of a new National Assembly.*

The public debt was already immense at my coming to the throne, and has increased under my reign an expensive but honourable war has been the cause, and the augmentation of taxes the consequences of it; but an unequal levy has caused them to be more severely felt. A very general discontent, a too great desire for innovation, have taken hold of the people's minds, and will end in misleading their judgment, if they do not hasten to fix them by wise and moderate councils.

*(Source: Annual Register, King of France's Speech on the Opening of the States General, May 9, 1789)*

## **Document H**

### **From the Declaration of the Rights of Man, August 26, 1789**

*The Declaration of the Rights of Man was adopted by the National Constituent Assembly and fundamentally opposed the traditional structure of the Ancien Régime.*

- I. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility.
- II. The aim of all political association is to preserve the natural and unalienable rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, and security and resistance to oppression.
- III. The principle of all sovereignty rests essentially in the nation. No body and no individual may exercise authority which does not emanate from the nation expressly  
  
[...]
- VI. Law is the expression of the general will. All citizens being equal in its eyes are equally admissible to all public dignities, offices, and employment's, according to their capacity, and with no other distinction than that of their virtues and talents.