

## The National Constituent Assembly and the Future of France

The deputies faced the enormous task of trying to develop a new constitution while governing a country torn by unrest and fear. They began working long days. New city governments were formed throughout the country and support for the National Constituent Assembly increased. Some deputies felt overwhelmed by the size of their task.

**“I am far from sharing the optimism of some of our colleagues. The masses of starving people, the numbers of discontented, the difficulties of every sort imaginable...all combine to discourage me.”**

—Jean-François Campmas, member of the National Constituent Assembly, August 13, 1789

As stories of the Great Fear spread, the assembly made a radical decision. Swept up by the spirit of reform and working late into the night on August 4, 1789 the assembly decided to end many of the privileges of the nobility. The deputies hoped that this would calm the peasants and decrease unrest. Some also hoped that it would reduce the power of the nobility, particularly those they worried were out to end the revolution. In a single evening, the assembly upended the centuries-old social hierarchy of France. Some historians believe that this was the most significant result of the French Revolution.

Many of the rights and privileges of the nobility were eliminated. For example, the assembly (which included nobles) ended the system of dues and taxes that peasants had to make to the nobility. These had been deeply resented and had appeared often in the “lists of grievances.” The nobility’s exclusive hunting rights and private tolls also were

abolished. The deputies ended the payment of tithes and the purchase of public offices. In theory, positions would be obtained based on ability.

**“In the future, only wealth, talent, and virtue will distinguish one man from another.... We are a nation of brothers. The king is our father and France is our mother.”**

—Claude Gantheret, member of the National Constituent Assembly, letters of August 5 and 11, 1789

A few voices in the assembly of more than a thousand also called to end slavery in France’s colonies, to give Protestants full religious freedom, and to ban nobility outright.

These issues were not acted on, but would become issues for debate in the coming months. After the assembly’s action, unrest in the countryside slowly began to decrease.

**“Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.”**

Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

**Why did the deputies write the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen?**

On the afternoon of August 4, the deputies had agreed to write a preface to the new constitution as quickly as possible. After several weeks of discussion, prolonged by members of the clergy reluctant to allow complete freedom of worship, the assembly voted to approve this preface, now called the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. The document was influenced by the Virginia Declaration of Rights written in 1776 by George Mason. The Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen promised liberty and equality to citizens and emphasized the need for constitutional protections for these rights. It also said that sovereignty (the right to rule) rested in the people of the nation and not just the king.



"Quick, quick, quick  
Hit it while it's hot  
quick, quick, quick  
Keep at it!  
Our hearts must be in the work."

This print shows the Three Estates working cooperatively to forge the new constitution.

The approval of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen raised many important questions and issues about how to interpret and enact this document. What was the role of the king? Did he have the final say (or veto power) over new laws? What exactly was a citizen? Who would be eligible to vote? Were women citizens? Did they have equal rights? Should there be a bicameral legislature? Should there be religious freedom in France? If men are born and remain free, should slavery be abolished?

### ***What were the divisions in the assembly?***

As the assembly began to consider just what the principles laid out in the Declaration

meant, three factions began to emerge. The differences that had been temporarily put aside in the revolutionary fervor of July had resurfaced.

The first group made up the majority of the assembly and were considered moderates. This group believed the revolution was over and imagined that France would become a constitutional monarchy, perhaps like Great Britain.

A second and much smaller group of conservative nobility and clergy thought that maybe the revolution had gone too far. They believed that the king should retain his authority and that the privileges renounced on August 4th by nobility and clergy should be reclaimed.

The third group was also a small minority of the assembly. These were the radical "patriot" deputies, who wanted more rights for all. For example, they wanted political rights and legal equality for Protestants. It is important to note that they did not argue for ending the monarchy.

The seating of the assembly was arranged in an oval with the president sitting on one side. The conservatives sat to the right of the president, the radical patriots to the left. The moderates, in the middle. This is the origin of the political terms we use today: conservatives are referred as the "right"; moderates are called "the center"; liberals are referred to as the "left."

In the coming days, you will recreate the debate among these three groups as they tried to write a new constitution for France.

You will consider whether the king should have a veto over laws and who is eligible to vote. You will consider questions of religious freedom, the role of women in politics, the role of the Catholic Church and religion in society, and whether slavery should be ended in the colonies.

The actual debates took place over a period of months and were complicated by the fact that the assembly needed to govern France as well as write a constitution.

***“Overwhelmed with responsibilities and distracted by endless contingencies, we must work now on one question, now another, despite our strong desire to concentrate on one issue at a time.”***

—Jacques-Athanase de Lombard-Taradeau,  
member of the National Constituent  
Assembly, October 15, 1789

The people of France followed the arguments in the assembly closely. The number of newspapers had increased from one daily paper in 1777 to more than thirty by end of 1789. Those who could not read could go hear the news read aloud in public. All over France, people formed political clubs where they argued about the issues in front of the assembly.

While the members of the assembly, most of whom were well-off, began to debate the future of French government, the people of France followed events closely. As you will see, they would find ways to make their opinions known.