**Black Death Perspective Sheet – Political**

Document 1

This excerpt from Henry Knighton’s *Chronicle*, which was written between 1378 and 1396, contains information about political effects of the Black Death in England. Knighton lived through the plague and his observations offer valuable insights into the chaos of that time period. He describes actions taken by the King of England, Edward III, in an attempt to deal with rising labor prices as a result of the disease.

*Excerpt taken from Knighton’s Chronicle 1337-1396, written by Henry Knighton, a member of the clergy of the Catholic Church who lived through the plague.*

The King sent a new law to all counties of the realm that harvesters and other laborers should not receive more pay than they had before the plague. But the laborers were so arrogant and hostile that they paid no attention to the King’s law. If any lords or vassals wanted to hire the workers, the vassals realized they would have had to pay the workers whatever they asked. The landowners were forced to satisfy the greed and arrogance of these laborers, or watch their crops go unharvested and die. When it became known to the King that the vassals did not observe his law and had given the workers the higher wages, the King issued heavy fines to the vassals. The King arrested many laborers and threw them into prison.

Document 2

This passage is from a sermon (religious speech) delivered in England 30 years after the events in the previous passage. It could be viewed as a religious response to the actions by King Edward 30 thirty years earlier.

Chronicles by Jean Froissart (1381)  
*This document comes from a sermon directed towards English peasants in the marketplace. The  
peasants are complaining that they do horrible work with little reward, while the lords are rich  
and have easy lives*.

“My good friends, things cannot go on well in England until everything shall be in common; when there shall be neither servant nor master; when the lords shall be no more masters than ourselves. How badly have they used us! And for what reason do they hold us as serfs? Are we not all descended from the same parents, Adam and Eve? We are called serfs; and if we do not perform our services, we are beaten, and we have not any sovereign (leader) to whom we can complain, or who wishes to hear us and do us justice. Let us go to the king, who is young, and speak with him, telling him we must have it otherwise, or we shall take action ourselves. If we join together, our fellow serfs will follow us, in the hopes of being free. When the king shall see us, we shall obtain a favorable answer, or we must then work to amend (change) our condition."

Document 3

This document compares changes in areas of Europe with high or low death rates from the Black Death.

*This edited document is from an interview with two professors from the University of Virginia, Daniel Gingerich and Jan Vogler, further discussing the political changes in Europe and how they differed between East and West.*

We found changes in three areas of politics due to the Black Death. First, in areas of Europe that had fewer deaths, the traditional feudal structure remained strong and unchanged. The nobility continued to use bribes and physical threats to maintain political power.

Second, in areas of Europe with fewer deaths, the manor lords maintained their fiefs and control over the serfs. The serfs had fewer opportunities to protest or negotiate for higher pay. In areas of Europe with large numbers of deaths, there was a large labor shortage. The vassals were forced to pay their workers higher wages because of the shortage. Some peasants were even given land to own.

Third, in areas hard hit by plague deaths and low population numbers, some local/village elections began to take place with little interference from lords and vassals. This change did not occur in areas of Europe that had low death rates due to the Black Death. Instead, the lord maintained political power over the villages.