

## **The Political Executive**

### **ROBERT ELGIE**

The Fifth Republic has a dual executive. That is to say, the 1958 Constitution gave powers to both the President and the Prime Minister. In so doing, it helped to create the potential for tension within the dual executive. As the first President of the Fifth Republic, General de Gaulle helped to resolve this tension by reforming the process by which the President is elected and creating the expectation of presidential leadership. Since his re-election as President in 2002 Jacques Chirac has tried to exercise such leadership, setting the policy agenda and appointing a loyal Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, to implement his presidential programme. Even so, events during the Fifth Republic have shown that leadership responsibilities can pass from the President to the Prime Minister. This occurred most recently from 1997-2002 when Chirac, the right-wing President, was opposed by Lionel Jospin, the socialist Prime Minister. Moreover, whether there is presidential or prime ministerial leadership, executive leadership occurs within the context of a wider set of political, economic and social factors. Relationships within the wider core executive as well as domestic and international events affect the ability of both Presidents and Prime Ministers to set the political agenda and implement their political vision. Over time, institutional change, Europeanisation and globalisation have increased the constraints on political leaders. There is now an increasing mismatch between the popular demand for political leadership, particularly presidential leadership, and the executive's ability to reform the system. All the same, when the conditions are right, Presidents and Prime Ministers can still set a direction for the country and implement a reform agenda. Indeed, President Chirac's stance in the run-

up to the American-led invasion of Iraq demonstrated that the President can exercise leadership in world affairs as well.

### **The dual executive**

Many of the contemporary issues of executive politics in France find their origin in the Fourth Republic. One of the Fourth Republic's main problems, and one which helped to hasten its collapse in 1958, was a lack of executive leadership. During the Fourth Republic, the head of state, the President of the Republic, was merely a figurehead capable of wielding little or no executive power and unable to provide any strategic vision behind which support for either the government of the day or Republic itself could be mobilised. What is more, the role of the head of government was equally weak. In Philip Williams's classic study of the Fourth Republic, he summed up the role of the head of government as follows: "instead of the leader of a united team, almost every premier had to be a broker between rivals over whom he had little control" (Williams, 1964, p. 195). There were 25 heads of government in 12 years and one government survived for just a couple of days. Against this background, the 1958 constitution was deliberately designed to end this situation and create the conditions for executive leadership. It did so by giving powers to both the President and the Prime Minister, thus establishing a dual executive.

The 1958 constitution seems to encourage a system of prime ministerial government by giving day-to-day policy responsibilities to the Prime Minister. For example, Article 20 states that the government decides and directs the policy of the nation, that it has the administration and the armed forces at its disposal and that it is accountable to the lower house of parliament, the National Assembly. Article 21 states that the Prime Minister is in general charge of the government's work and is personally responsible for

national defence and the implementation of laws. Article 8 states that the Prime Minister has the right to propose the names of government ministers to the President. Articles 34-50 indicate that the Prime Minister is responsible for the government's business in parliament and outlines the considerable powers that the government now enjoys over parliament. So, for example, the Prime Minister fields questions to the government in the National Assembly once a week. By contrast, the President is forbidden from even entering the parliamentary chamber. He may only have a message read out there (Article 18) and this happens very infrequently. All told, the Prime Minister is placed at the head of a government, which dominates the National Assembly and which is charged with the day-to-day realisation and implementation of public policy.

That said, the 1958 constitution also provides the basis for presidential leadership. For example, the President is responsible for negotiating and ratifying international treaties (Article 52). This means that the President is involved in foreign policy making. In addition, the President is the head of the armed forces (Article 15). In some countries, this title is purely honorific. After all, in Britain the Queen is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, but her position is merely symbolic. In France, the same does not apply. Even though Article 21 states that the Prime Minister is responsible for national defence, the President's finger is on the nuclear button and the President heads the main defence policy-making committees. For example, it was Chirac personally who decided in 1995 that France should resume nuclear testing in the South Pacific. Overall, the President is in charge of 'high' politics, meaning France's position in the European and world order. More than that, the President also has a more general influence. The President appoints the Prime Minister (Article 8). As we shall see, if the political conditions are right, this means that the person appointed may be someone who is unswervingly loyal and/or political junior to the President, thus giving

the head of state an indirect influence over the system as a whole by way of the head of government. Moreover, Article 8 states that the Prime Minister proposes the names of government ministers to the President, but it also states that the President appoints ministers. So, the President has the power to decide whether or not to accept the Prime Minister's suggestions. In practice, this has meant that ministers have often been thought of as presidential nominees rather than people chosen by the Prime Minister personally. The Minister for Foreign Affairs from 2002-04 was a case in point. Prior to his appointment, the Minister, Dominique de Villepin, had been the most senior adviser to President Chirac. Consequently, during de Villepin's time at the Quai d'Orsay - the home of the French Foreign Ministry - Chirac knew that he could rely on the Minister's complete loyalty. Finally, Article 9 states that the President chairs the meetings of the Council of Ministers, the French equivalent of the British Cabinet. This means that the President is intimately involved in the weekly meetings of the government's most senior representatives, usually determining what is and is not discussed.

In these ways, the 1958 constitution provided the basis of France's new-found system of executive leadership. However, it was the 1962 constitutional reform establishing the direct election of the President that created the system as we know today. In 1958 Charles de Gaulle was elected President by a wide-ranging electoral college mainly comprising representatives of local government. Yet de Gaulle believed that it was important for the President to be able to speak on behalf of the French people as a whole. In order to do so, he believed that the President needed a direct link with the people. In 1958 it had been impossible to create this link because it would have meant giving the vote to electors in Algeria, which was then an integral part of the French territory. In 1962, when Algeria had gained independence, a reform of the electoral system was possible. Consequently, following an assassination attempt on his life, de Gaulle proposed a

constitutional amendment. The reform was passed in a referendum and the first direct election of the President took place in 1965 with de Gaulle winning a clear victory.

The 1962 reform was fundamental because it meant that the presidential election is now the centre-piece of the political process. At the election candidates put forward a programme outlining what they stand for and what policies they will introduce if elected. For example, at the 2002 election Jacques Chirac's re-election programme was a 24-page document called 'My commitment for France' (<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/rpr.infos.27/00000005.htm>). A key element of this document was a 'zero-tolerance' law and order policy. Other measures included the promise of tax cuts over five years and a reform of the system of local government. What is important about this programme is that, following Chirac's re-election, the policies in it became the priorities of the incoming government and the newly-appointed Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin. In fact, the appointment of Raffarin tells us a great deal about how the French dual executive usually works. The Prime Minister was personally chosen by the President. Raffarin was a Senator and the President of the Regional Council of Poitou-Charentes, but he was not one of the most senior political figures on the right. However, he had become a loyal supporter of Chirac and the two shared a number of ideas about how to reform the system, including a commitment to a greater decentralisation of political powers. When he was appointed Raffarin made it clear that his task was to implement the President's policies. For example, in his investiture speech to the National Assembly the Prime Minister outlined the policies of his new government. He stated that these policies were founded on the principle of 'humanism' and then he went on to say: "In bringing about this new French humanism, we will be fulfilling the President's promise to the French people. This is our binding contract" (<http://www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/en/p.cfm?ref=34983>).

In this way, even though President Chirac did not play a direct role in the detailed formulation and implementation of government policy after the 2002 presidential election, he could be sure that the policies being pursued by the Prime Minister were the ones that he had proposed at the election.

That said, the presidential election is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for presidential leadership. As the Raffarin example demonstrates, the President's influence over the system is exercised indirectly via the Prime Minister. However, the Prime Minister is accountable to the National Assembly and most legislation must be passed through parliament. As a result, even though the government has powers to control parliament, if a majority in the Assembly is actively opposed to the Prime Minister, then policies will not be passed and the Prime Minister will be dismissed. Ultimately, then, presidential leadership is founded on the presence of a supportive majority in the National Assembly. Following the 2002 parliamentary election, the President's party, the UMP, won more than 60 per cent of Assembly seats. So, Chirac was able to appoint Raffarin as his loyal lieutenant. However, when an election has returned a majority opposed to the President, then the head of state has been obliged to appoint an opponent as Prime Minister. This is known as 'cohabitation' and it describes the situation where there is a President from one party/coalition and a Prime Minister from an opposing party/coalition. There have been three periods of 'cohabitation' since 1958: 1986-88, when François Mitterrand, the socialist President, was opposed to Jacques Chirac, who was then the gaullist Prime Minister; 1993-95, when Mitterrand was opposed to another gaullist Prime Minister, Édouard Balladur; and 1997-2002, when Chirac, this time as President, was opposed to the socialist Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin.

Within the executive the decision-making process changes considerably during periods of 'cohabitation'. In defence and foreign affairs the President maintains an influence. For example, Chirac was the first

foreign leader to visit the United States and meet President Bush after the 9/11 attacks. This was a highly symbolic meeting and it is noteworthy that it was the President and not the Prime Minister who attended. Equally, the President was instrumental in the international efforts to restore peace in Kosovo during the 1999 crisis. So, the constitution allows the President to maintain the image of being a world leader. In domestic affairs, however, the President, now lacking the support of the Prime Minister and the parliamentary majority, becomes a figurehead. Instead, by virtue of Articles 20 and 21 of the Constitution the Prime Minister is now able to formulate and implement policies of his/her own. The 1997-2002 period is illuminating in this regard. Prime Minister Jospin was able to pass a series of reforms to which President Chirac was opposed. These included the introduction of the 35-hour working week, the so-called 'parity' reform that tried to ensure 50/50 representation of men/women in representative institutions, an increase in public sector recruitment to help young people gain employment, and a reform of political institutions in Corsica. Indeed, in his first few days in office, the new Prime Minister was able to reinforce the social chapter of the Amsterdam Treaty, something that President Chirac had been unwilling to do previously. In one sense, the increased influence of the Prime Minister came at a price (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau, 2003). At the 2002 presidential election, where Jospin was a candidate against Chirac, the Prime Minister was judged on his economic record over the past five years. For many people, the record was poor, or at least not good enough, and Jospin was punished. For his part, Chirac, who had been a figurehead during that time, was able to win support by promising what he would do if he was returned to office. So, at the first ballot of the election people sanctioned Jospin's past performance and supported, albeit fairly unenthusiastically, the programme that Chirac proposed for the future. Whatever the impact of 'cohabitation' on the 2002 election, in the future it is less likely to occur. In December 2000 a

constitutional reform reduced the President's term of office to five years, the same as the term for the National Assembly. Given that presidential elections are now due to be held just before parliamentary elections, the chances are that the newly-elected President will be able to bring home a presidential majority in the Assembly. All the same, such a victory is not guaranteed and 'cohabitation' may yet occur again in the future.

The experience of the Raffarin and Jospin premierships are poles apart. The former is a loyal supporter of the President, while the latter was an avowed opponent. Between these two extremes, there have been other types of presidential/prime ministerial relations. Even outside periods of 'cohabitation', the relationship between the President and the Prime Minister has sometimes been more conflictual. For example, in 1974 Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, a liberal, was elected President with the support of the right-wing gaullists. In return, Giscard appointed the leader of the gaullists, who was none other than Jacques Chirac even then, as Prime Minister. The two parties and the two people did not see eye to eye. Chirac accused Giscard of trying to undermine his position as head of government and he resigned in protest after just two years in office. Similarly, in 1988 President Mitterrand appointed a fellow socialist but long-time rival, Michel Rocard, as Prime Minister. Again, this was mainly as a reward for the fact that Rocard had loyally supported Mitterrand's 1988 re-election campaign. However, in office the two did not get on and Rocard often found it difficult to win the President's support when he was trying to deal with government Ministers. This last example is doubly instructive. It tells us something about the potentially tense relations that can occur between the President and the Prime Minister as a function of France's dual executive structure. In addition, it also indicates that the two main members of the executive have to deal with the wider core executive, notably government Ministers and the administration generally. It is to this aspect of the core executive that we now turn.

## **The wider core executive**

The President and Prime Minister stand at the apex of a wider governmental and administrative structure. The two key elements of this structure are government Ministers and civil servants. The opportunity for executive leadership depends at least in part on the relationship between the dual executive and this wider core executive. Specifically, the members of the dual executive, and particularly the Prime Minister as the head of government, face the problem of ensuring joined-up government, meaning the capacity of the government and administration to act as a coherent and purposive unit. For political and structural reasons the wider core executive in France is very disjointed. There are formal and informal mechanisms that help to increase the unity of the system, but the President and, particularly, the Prime Minister often find that the wider core executive can be very difficult to manage, never mind direct.

The structure of the government has an important bearing on the process of executive leadership because the Prime Minister has to manage an inherently divided system. For example, one of the first and sometimes most difficult tasks of any new government is to decide the so-called '*décrets d'attribution*' of each Minister and, particularly, junior Minister. These decrees set out the domain within which each Minister can legally act. They are the source of a brief but often intense period of inter-ministerial rivalry as each Minister tries to maximise his/her sphere of competence at the expense of colleagues. However, this brief period of rivalry is symptomatic of a more institutionalised competition within the government generally. Political careers are determined at least in part by whether or not Ministers are seen to be successful at their job. Therefore, even though all Ministers are part of a government that is collectively responsible to the National Assembly,

inevitably they compete against each other. One way in which this competition manifests itself is through the budgetary process. Ministers want to maximise their share of a scarce resource: government money. So, if the Minister for Industry requires funds to finance a pet project and prove that s/he has political clout, then it can only be at the expense of another project in another Ministry. This situation encourages Ministers to scheme against each other and, sometimes, to criticise each other more or less openly. More than that, individual Ministries are often made up of more than one junior Ministry. For example, after the March 2004 reshuffle the Ministry for Employment, Labour and Social Cohesion comprised five junior Ministries: Labour Relations; the Fight against Vulnerability and Exclusion; the Professional Development of Young People; Housing; and Integration and Equality of Opportunity. The creation of such a large Ministry was a sign that the government wanted to prioritise social affairs. All the same, it also institutionalised competition for scarce financial resources within the Ministry.

Ministerial divisions of this sort are compounded by the structure of the permanent administration. The central administration in France is highly compartmentalised, meaning that it is made up of many separate and, once again, competing units. All French Ministries consist of a number of administrative units called 'directions'. For example, in 2004 the Ministry of Culture and Communication comprised seven separate directions: General Administration; Architecture and Heritage; National Archives; Development of the Media; Books and Reading; Music, Dance, Theatre and Festivals; and Museums. Despite being in the same Ministry, each direction has its own interests and priorities. Moreover, there is no overarching official in the department. So, the Minister of Culture has to deal with seven different senior directors, the name for the head of a direction, each of whom wishes to promote the interests of his/her own direction first and foremost. Indeed,

administrative divisions do not end there. Directions are divided into sub-directions — seven in the case of the aforementioned direction of Architecture and Heritage alone. In turn, sub-directions are divided into bureaux. In addition, there are myriad stand-alone organisations within Ministries: delegations, centres, administrative, scientific, commercial and educational public bodies and so on. Plus, there are field organisations, or deconcentrated services, that operate across the national territory. The net result is that Ministries are very divided organisations.

The structural divisions within the government are overlaid by a set of political divisions. For example, governments can be divided on ideological grounds. This is particularly true for coalition governments. In the 1997-2002 government there were various disputes between the main coalition partners. For example, reform of the public sector and the administration would have been more extensive if the Communist party had not been in government. As it was, Prime Minister Jospin had to take account of his coalition partner's priorities. Ideological divisions are not confined to coalition governments. In the early days of the 2004 Raffarin government there were sharp disagreements between the Finance Minister, Nicholas Sarkozy, and the Minister for Employment, Labour and Social Cohesion, Jean-Louis Borloo. Both are members of the UMP party, but Sarkozy is a liberal, which, in addition to his role as Finance Minister, means that he has a general tendency to promote a less extensive role for the state in general and, hence, limit government spending. By contrast, Borloo believes that the state should play an active role to ensure social justice. This means greater financial support by the state. In the early days of the new government, there was open competition between the two. More generally, in any government some Ministers are more influential than others. There may be senior party figures whose views the Prime Minister cannot ignore. For example, during the 1997-2002 government the Minister for Social Affairs, Martine Aubry, took

personal responsibility for the passage of the 35-hour working week laws. In so doing, she came into conflict with other Ministers, notably the then Finance Minister, Dominique Strauss-Kahn. In this case, the Prime Minister fully supported the Aubry reforms, but there is no doubt that Aubry's senior status within the Socialist party and the government hierarchy helped the eventual passage of the reforms.

At times, Ministers can even seem to challenge the very position of the Prime Minister. This is particularly true if the Prime Minister is politically damaged. In the 1991-92 government of Edith Cresson, the Finance Minister, Pierre Bérégovoy, was able to impose his priorities on the government at the expense of the Prime Minister whose opinion poll ratings were so low that she soon lacked any authority. The position of Jean-Pierre Raffarin immediately after the 2004 regional elections was quite similar. The right's performance was so poor at these elections that the head of government's position was weakened. At the same time, though, the Prime Minister's ability to manage political priorities successfully may also be compromised if Ministers are weak. This situation sometimes occurs when Ministers are drawn from 'civil society', or outside politics. A case in point was Francis Mer, a businessman who was appointed as Finance Minister at the Prime Minister's request in the 2002-04 Raffarin government. He had little party political experience and the fact that he lacked explicit presidential support meant that he had little political authority. As a result, he found it difficult to impose his views on government colleagues. Indeed, the same was true for the academic, Luc Ferry, who was the Education Minister during the same government. Both Ministers were highly talented, but the inability to control their respective departmental briefs weakened the position of the Prime Minister and ultimately the government as a whole. In the end, both Ministers were replaced at the 2004 reshuffle.

These structural and political divisions do not mean that joined-up government is impossible but they do reinforce the need for governmental coordination (Hayward and Wright, 2002). Ministers have to manage the divisions within their own departments. They are assisted in this regard by a set of personal advisers who are collectively known as the '*cabinet*'. Each Minister has a *cabinet* of between 7-12 people. They look after the Minister's political career, writing speeches and providing policy advice. In addition, they play a key role liaising with the permanent administration and coordinating the work of the department. More generally, the Prime Minister has to manage the government as a whole. To this end, the Prime Minister also has his/her set of personal advisers. There are usually about 40-50 people in the Prime Minister's *cabinet*. Generally speaking, there is one *cabinet* member for each government department. This person follows the work of his/her assigned Ministry and provides policy advice. At the top of the *cabinet* structure is the head of the Prime Minister's personal staff, or *directeur de cabinet*, who coordinates the work of the *cabinet* as whole and who has an overview of the government's work generally. These staff resources help the Prime Minister to coordinate the system, although Raffarin was criticised for the choice of his first *directeur de cabinet*, Pierre Steinmetz, who seemed unable to ensure that ministerial advisers abided by the Prime Minister's decisions. In this role as chief coordinator, the Prime Minister is sometimes helped and sometimes abetted by the President's personal staff, which is called the General Secretariat of the Presidency. The organisation of the President's personal staff is similar to the Prime Minister's *cabinet*. The relationship between the two teams mirrors the relationship between the President and Prime Minister. At times, they work in tandem. On other occasions, they seem to be in competition with each other. In the most extreme case, during periods of 'cohabitation' regular contact is only allowed at the highest level between the Prime Minister's *directeur de cabinet* and the head of the President's staff,

the General Secretary of the Presidency (Schrameck, 2001). In addition to these political staffs, there are also various overarching administrative units. Most notably, the General Secretariat of the Government is the French equivalent of the British Cabinet Office, providing advice on matters of law and taking care of the administrative aspect of the government's work, including the preparation of weekly meetings of the Council of Ministers, the name for the French Cabinet. In addition, a separate institution, the so-called SGCI, coordinates the government's work as it relates to the formulation and implementation of law at the EU level.

Helped by these organisations, one of the Prime Minister's main functions is to arbitrate between the conflicting demands of the different Ministers. Again, the budgetary process is instructive in this regard. Much of this process takes the form of bilateral relations between the Finance and Budget Ministers on the one hand, and spending Ministers on the other. Many issues are resolved during the course of protracted negotiations between the two sets of actors. Each year, though, some issues will be impossible to resolve. A Minister will demand money that the Finance Ministry is unwilling to give. In these cases, the Prime Minister arbitrates. This places the Prime Minister in a potentially powerful position. The head of government is in a position to determine the government's priorities. That said, the Prime Minister's ability in this regard is limited. Most notably, as we have seen, outside 'cohabitation' the Prime Minister's priorities have to be consistent with the President's and in arbitration meetings the President's advisers will emphasise this point if the need arises. More than that, in some cases the President may intervene more directly in the arbitration process. For example, a strongly placed Minister may be unwilling to accept the arbitration of the Prime Minister, especially if the head of government's authority has been weakened. In these cases, the President may be required to make the final decision either formally or informally.

Ultimately, the political success of the President and, particularly, the Prime Minister depends on the ability to ensure joined-up government within the wider core executive. Structural and political divisions make this an extremely difficult task. The President can offset these difficulties somewhat by adopting a position above the fray and focussing on world events. But there are limits. For example, Chirac was heavily criticised for not doing enough when the government failed to prevent the hundreds of deaths that occurred during the heat wave in the summer of 2003. Whatever about the President's ability to concentrate on foreign policy, the Prime Minister has no such luxury. The head of government's performance is determined as a function of the public's perception of the state of the economy, how safe people felt on the streets and in their homes, and how well they feel France is performing generally. In recent times, a rash of books have argued that France is in decline (e.g., Bavarez, 2003). Certainly, recent Prime Ministers have found that their lot is not always a happy one. Alain Juppé had a poor record and his government was kicked out of office in 1997. Lionel Jospin governed for five years only to find that he came third at the 2002 presidential election behind the leader of the extreme right, Jean-Marie Le Pen. Jean-Pierre Raffarin found that his honeymoon period was very short and his party fared disastrously at the 2004 regional elections, weakening his political authority. These examples illustrate the difficulties associated with running the country. They are partly a function of the problems with managing the wider core executive. They are also partly the result of the wider context within which political leaders operate.

### **The core executive in a wider context**

There is an increasing mismatch between the promises presidential candidates make at elections and their ability to keep these promises in office.

This trend was illustrated first and perhaps most starkly in 1981. President Mitterrand was elected on a very reformist programme. In fairness, many reforms were passed, but many were not. Moreover, in March 1983 the government had to embark on a complete economic policy U-turn. Since this time, presidential programmes have tended to be somewhat less ambitious. Even so, they still contain the prospect of a brighter future. For example, Chirac's 2002 programme began with the following statement: "Before us ... there are undreamed of possibilities ... to take France forward for the well-being, the blossoming, the happiness of every French woman and every French man" (<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/rpr.infos.27/00000005.htm>). There is little doubt that voters are now more cynical than before and that they take the claims made in presidential programmes with a pinch of salt, if they read them at all. However, there is also no doubt that presidential elections still create the expectation of change and change for the better. Arguably, though, such change is more difficult to bring about than ever before. In particular, the dual executive faces more constraints at home than was previously the case and more challenges internationally. Thus, Presidents, and particularly Prime Ministers, sometimes seem doomed to failure. Even so, when the circumstances are right there is still the opportunity to show leadership as the French attitude to the US/UK invasion of Iraq demonstrated.

For many years there was a strong *étatiste*, or state-centred, approach to policy making in France. For example, there was a *dirigiste* system of state-led economic intervention; there was a highly developed system of economic and social planning; and the state promoted a supported a policy of national industrial champions and costly high-tech projects. These policies, and many others, were underpinned by a wide-ranging set of state institutions whose organisation and powers provided the dual executive with key decision-making powers. These institutions included public enterprises (*entreprises publiques*); quasi-public organisations (*établissements publics*); as well as

individual institutions, such as the Bank of France and the state-controlled investment organisation, the Caisse des Dépôts et des Consignations. In recent times, this system has been reformed. Compared with countries like Australia, New Zealand and the UK, the degree of reform might be considered relatively modest (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000, p. 231). However, in the French context the extent of reform has been significant. For instance, both left and right-wing governments have privatised public enterprises; quasi-public organisations have been transformed into public-private partnerships; decision-making powers have been transferred from government ministries to independent administrative authorities; and institutions such as the Bank of France have been granted operational independence. In short, the French state still comprises thousands of institutions that continue to carry out an almost bewildering variety of tasks. Hence, there is a continuing need for joined-up government. All the same, over the last decade or so the state has been divested of many of its most important responsibilities.

In addition to these domestic changes, France has been affected by international challenges. Indeed, some of the aforementioned domestic changes have been brought about such challenges. In particular, France, like other European countries, has been affected by Europeanisation and globalisation. At the European level interest rate decisions are now taken by the European Central Bank; agriculture policy is determined in Brussels not Paris; decisions about company mergers and acquisitions have to be approved by the European Commission; member-state governments are forbidden from subsidising ailing state companies and industries; and so on. In the international arena, French economic growth is at least partly a function of economic demand in the US; American foreign policy in the Middle East helps to determine oil prices, which in turn impact on inflation, debt and growth rates in France; French companies are in competition with

huge multi-national private companies, meaning that to survive they have to be given the opportunity to form strategic alliances with foreign partners and privatisation is often a necessary condition of any such strategy; and so forth. All told, while decision makers in France were never free from external pressures, these pressures now manifest themselves in ways that are often much more immediate and, sometimes, much more dramatic than was previously the case.

These domestic and international changes have had a profound impact on the decision-making capacity of the dual executive. For example, during the 2002 presidential election campaign Jacques Chirac made a pledge to reduce the level of income tax by a third over five years, including a five per cent cut in the first year of his term of office. This latter pledge was met and Prime Minister Raffarin reiterated his commitment to fulfilling the more general promise on a number of occasions. However, this campaign promise has huge cost implications and the government has been wrestling with how to deal with them ever since. Given the current very modest levels of economic growth, in order to keep this promise the government will need to reduce public spending, increase the size of the public debt, or raise taxes elsewhere. However, it is notoriously difficult to reduce public spending. Upwards of 90 per cent of public money is pre-committed from one year to next in the form of multi-year spending programmes, public sector salaries, investment and ongoing costs. By the same token, the terms of the European Union's Stability and Growth Pact mean that France's budget deficit cannot go above 3 per cent of Gross Domestic Product. France's deficit already exceeds that figure. So, even though the French government, along with the German government which faces similar problems, have attempted to make the application of the rules of Stability and Growth Pact less stringent, there is in effect very little room for manoeuvre in that regard. As a result, the only way that the President's promise can be met is if other taxes are raised to

compensate from the loss of income resulting from the reduction in come tax. This seems to be what the government is doing. In particular, it has been accused of transferring the responsibility for certain issues from central government to local government. The effect may be that people pay less in national income tax, but more in local taxation. In this case, the President may be able to claim that he has kept his promise to reduce income tax, but he may have done so by having to raise taxes elsewhere. This is not necessarily what the public expected, so there is the potential for disillusionment and cynicism.

Faced with the problems of managing the wider core executive and with the constraints imposed upon the core executive by the wider domestic and international context, it would be tempting to conclude that French political leaders are now powerless. This is not the case. Reforms are possible. Indeed, in the period from 1 October to 18 December 2003 no fewer than 10 laws and 16 international treaties were passed. What is more, governments can pass significant reforms. For example, the flagship reforms of the Jospin government, including the 35-hour working week and the parity reform, were specific initiatives that introduced major aspects of social change and that flowed directly from the election of a new government. They would not have happened otherwise. By the same token, while there is an ongoing debate about how they should be funded, the decentralisation reforms passed by the Raffarin government in 2003-03 have the potential to make a big difference to the balance of power between central and local government. In this case, the decentralisation reform figured prominently in the President's campaign programme and was one of Chirac's priorities when he was returned to office. It was also one of his loyal Prime Minister's policy priorities (Raffarin, 2002, pp. 144-48). There were few ministerial objections in principle and it was supported by the parliamentary majority. What is more, there were few European or wider international issues at stake. The decentralisation reform was a purely French affair.

In foreign affairs, too, leadership may be possible. President Chirac's controversial stance in the run-up to the American-led invasion of Iraq is instructive in this regard. Like many other people, Chirac did not believe the claims that Iraq had ready-to-go weapons of mass destruction and that it was actively supporting Al Qaeda activity. More than that, even if time and time again over the course of his political career, and he was Prime Minister as far back as 1974, Chirac has flip-flopped on foreign and domestic policy, his gaullist roots are very deep. In terms of foreign policy, what this means is that he believes France should be a major world power and, more importantly, one that is separate from the world's other superpower(s). When the US and the USSR were fighting the cold war, France often tried to steer a third way between them and upset the Americans in so doing. Now there is only one superpower, France is keen to lead or at least be part of a block of countries that can provide an alternative to the US point of view. Even so, Chirac's political beliefs do not explain why he was so outspokenly opposed to the US's plans. Here, the answer lies in domestic politics. After the 2002 elections, Chirac's party, the UMP, controlled all the main institutions of state - both houses of parliament, much of local government, the Constitutional Council, the higher reaches of the civil service and so on. Thus, there was very little opposition to the president. Moreover, public opinion was massively opposed to the war, so Chirac was on safe ground. The combination of all these factors allowed Chirac to adopt a much firmer stance than he might have been able to do so at another time. It is true that over the years France has been a more consistent supporter of the 'Arab' position than many other countries (*la politique arabe*). Indeed, when President Mitterrand was elected in 1981 he was criticised at home for being too close to the American line in his support for Israel. It is also true that France has a long history of good relations with Iraq. The deal to build the Isis and Osirak nuclear reactors was signed in 1975 when Chirac was Prime Minister and, more recently, France was heavily

involved in the exploitation of Iraq's oil fields. Even so, economic self-interest alone does not explain Chirac's anti-American position. If it did, then France would have been just as outspoken on similar issues before now and consistently so. After all, up to this time, France has had a habit of making a diplomatic nuisance of itself and then coming back into line at the last minute. The Iraq issue was different. Chirac's opposition to the war in Iraq was motivated by the failure to be convinced of the need for swift action against the country, by a long-standing gaullist attitude towards a particular type of foreign policy and by the knowledge that he had almost complete freedom to pursue this policy at home. This combination of factors allowed to him adopt a stand against the invasion of Iraq and led to him being reviled in the US as the rat-faced leader of the 'axis of weasel'. Whether or not Chirac was right to do so is another matter. The point being made is that Presidents, while constrained, can exercise leadership when the conditions are right.

## **Conclusion**

The direct election of the head of state created the expectation of presidential leadership in France. Even so, presidential leadership can only occur indirectly through the Prime Minister and, during periods of 'cohabitation', leadership responsibilities have shifted to the head of government. Such leadership has always been difficult to achieve because of the many structural and political divisions both within the dual executive and between members of the dual executive and the wider core executive. Indeed, executive leadership is perhaps even more difficult to exercise now than ever before because of the wider context in which the core executive operates, particularly the impact of Europeanisation and globalisation on the decision-making process. Nonetheless, Presidents maintain the potential to set the political agenda. Moreover, a supportive parliamentary majority means that

the Prime Minister has the capacity to pass reforms in particular areas. What is more, as Chirac's response to the American plans to invade Iraq shows, when the domestic political and wider external circumstances are right, then the President has the opportunity to exercise leadership in foreign affairs as well.

## Bibliography

Bavarez, Nicholas (2003) *La France qui tombe*, Paris, Perrin.

Hayward, Jack, and Vincent Wright (2002), *Governing from the Centre. Core Executive Coordination in France*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Lewis-Beck, Michael S., and Richard Nadeau (2003), 'Dual governance and economic voting: France and the United States', in Michael S. Lewis-Beck (ed.), *The French Voter. Before and After the 2002 Elections*, London, Palgrave, pp. 136-54.

Pollitt, Christopher, and Geert Bouckaert (2000), *Public Management Reform. A Comparative Analysis*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Raffarin, Jean-Pierre (2002), *Pour une nouvelle gouvernance*, Paris, Archipel.

Schrameck, Olivier (2001), *Matignon Rive Gauche 1997-2001*, Paris, Seuil.

Williams, Philip M. (1972), *Crisis and Compromise. Politics in the Fourth Republic*, London, Longman.

## Further reading

### The political executive

All textbooks provide details of the executive in France, including 'cohabitation'. An overview about the different ways in which the executive can operate can be found in Elgie and Griggs (2000, chap. 2). In English by far and away the most informative book is now Hayward and Wright (2002). A more chronological account of presidential politics is provided by Bell (2000). A similar style is adopted by Thody (1998). In French, the classic text is the second part of Duverger (1978). A more recent general text is Wahl and Quermonne (1995). A critical view of France's presidential system is provided by Duhamel (2002).

Bell, David S. (2000), *Presidential Power in Fifth Republic France*, London, Berg.

Duhamel, Olivier (2002), *Vive la VI<sup>e</sup> République*, Paris, Seuil.

Duverger, Maurice (1978), *Échec au roi*, Paris, Albin Michel.

Elgie, Robert, and Steven Griggs (2000), *Debates in French Politics*, London, Routledge.

Thody, Philip (1998), *The Fifth French Republic. Presidents, Politics and Personalities*, London, Routledge.

Wahl, Nicholas, and Jean-Louis Quermonne (1995), *La France présidentielle. L'influence du suffrage universel sur la vie politique*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po.