

**Governance traditions and narratives of public sector reform in
contemporary France**

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GOVERNANCE TRADITIONS AND NARRATIVES OF PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE

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This article explores the basic traditions of governance in contemporary France and the narratives of public sector reform associated with them. It should be stressed right from the outset that this article does not aim to describe the set of public sector reforms that have been implemented in France in the last ten years or so. Instead, the aim is to demonstrate the similarities and differences between the narratives of the left and the right with regard to these reforms and to show how these narratives help to explain the types of reform that have been enacted. The basic argument is that there is a certain commonality to both the left and the right with regard to their narratives of public sector reform. At the same time, though, there are differences of emphasis both within each tradition and between the two main traditions themselves.

TRADITIONS OF GOVERNANCE IN FRANCE

There is in France a wide variety of ideological opinion as suggested by the large number of political parties. A list of electorally competitive political parties would currently need to include three trotskyite parties – Workers' Struggle (LO), the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) and the Workers' party (PT) – four left-wing parties – the Communist party (PCF), the Socialist party (PS), the Citizens' Movement party (MDC) and the Left-Radical party (MRG) – three ecology parties – the Greens (les Verts), the Independent Ecology Movement (MEI) and Ecology Generation (GE) – five centre-right or right-wing parties – the Union for French Democracy (UDF) – which itself comprises around nine separate groupings most notably the Christian Democratic party, Democratic Force (FD) – the Liberal Democracy party (DL), the gaullist Rally for the Republic (RPR) and two anti-European parties, the Rally for France (RPF) and the Movement for France (MPF) – two extreme right-wing parties – the National Front (FN) and the National Republican Movement (MNR) – and at least one issue-based grouping – the Hunting, Fishing, Nature, Tradition party (CPNT). Indeed, even this list is not fully comprehensive in that it fails to include

regionally-based parties in Corsica, the Overseas Departments and Territories as well as in mainland France itself.¹

Amidst the confusing array of parties, though, French political thought revolves around two basic and long-standing ideological traditions – the left and the right. The salience of the left/right dichotomy in French political life is considerable. Indeed, it dates back to the time of the French Revolution when the terms themselves were first coined. Over the years, of course, the popular understanding of what it means to be on the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ has changed considerably. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the terms still mean something to most people and that they help to constitute the basic terms of political competition. What is the contemporary basis of this difference? For the left, the difference is based on a belief that society can be improved. For example, the former socialist prime minister Michel Rocard, writes: “What, at bottom, has distinguished, from the outset, the left from the right? It is a belief in man. We no longer believe, like we did a century ago, that man is naturally good: too many unhappy, dramatic experiences have shattered our illusions. But we continue to believe and always will believe that man is perfectible so long as an intelligent and generous social organisation gives him the opportunity. And that the nobleness of political action, at the base as at the summit, in day-to-day militantism as in the exercise of power, consists of working tirelessly for this organisation” (Rocard, 1989, p. 23).² For the right, by contrast, the difference is based on a sceptical attitude towards the means by which the left is said to bring about social improvement, or as Philippe Séguin, a former RPR leader put it, “the myth of man’s liberation by the State ...” (Séguin, 1994, p. 21). A similar point has been emphasised by the former gaullist prime minister Édouard Balladur. He writes: “What do statist systems stand for if not a mistrust of man and the use to which he can put his liberty. In a liberal system, by contrast, the State bases its relationship with citizens on respect and the guarantee of personal responsibility because they are capable of assuming it. At the same time, it is up to the State to define the rules of the game, in other words an order that everyone must respect” (Balladur, 1989, p. 310). As we shall see, there are plenty of overlaps between left and right-wing traditions of governance in France and considerable similarities between left and right-wing narratives of public sector reform. At the same time, though, there remains a basic difference between the two main traditions in French political life.

Even though the left and the right constitute the basic intellectual foundations of French political life, within each tradition there are various strands of thought, or sub-traditions. Within the left, a distinction can be drawn between statist socialism and anti-statist socialism (Winock, 1992). Within the right, there are at least three separate sub-traditions – bonapartism, *orléanisme* and *ultracisme* (Rémond, 1982). As with the main traditions themselves, there is no doubt that the interpretation of the respective sub-traditions has altered over time. For example, what it is to be on the anti-statist left now is different from what it once used to be. Moreover, as we shall see, there is considerable overlap between the governance narratives of the various sub-traditions. All the same, the basic point applies: within the left and the right there are different traditions of governance and separate narratives of public sector reform. The rest of this section explores the various governance traditions and sub-traditions in contemporary France.

The left-wing traditions of governance

The French left has always been marked by competing doctrines, movements, circles, clubs, factions, think-tanks and the like. The divisions within the left have resulted from a mixture of material, ideological, strategic and personal concerns. In short, the left has never been united in its beliefs. That said, according to Winock (1992) within the socialist left there has always been one basic fault line over the years: on the one hand there has been a tradition of statist socialism, on the other hand there has been what for want of a better term might be called a tradition of anti-statist socialism, or alternatively non-statist socialism.³

The statist sub-tradition first manifested itself at the time of the revolution with the *jacobins*. The *jacobins* were clearly identified with the revolutionary ideal; they promoted a highly centralised and directive state; and they were concerned with issues of rights and liberties. The *jacobin* heritage meant that there was a strong tradition on the French left that radical change was possible, that it could be brought about by a top-down process and that it was fundamentally concerned with issues of democracy, republicanism and the nation. Today, this sub-tradition is alive and well most notably within the MDC led by the ex-socialist Minister of the Interior, Jean-Pierre Chevènement. So, for example, the party's statement of principles declares that "the nation is a living being which is continually being redefined and enriched by what its fellow citizens bring to it"

(www.mdc-france.org/positions/citoyenn.html, accessed 30 October 2001). In addition, the party wishes to defend the specificities of what it considers to be the traditional model of the French Republic. For example, this leads it to make a clear distinction between the public and the private. "Culture, religion, languages", the party says, "can express themselves freely in the private domain" (ibid). However, "national social cohesion", the party then goes on to add, "means respecting a certain number of common rules that protect and guarantee equality for everyone" (ibid). So, for the MDC difference is valued in the private sphere, whereas equality must be guaranteed in the public domain. This means that the party has a state-centric vision of the resource allocation of public goods across an homogeneous and centralised national territory.

Over and above an historic concern for the nation and the Republic, statist socialism has been associated most closely with state-centred economic issues. The Communist party is a clear example of this point. As recently as the late 1960s, Lenin and the Communist Manifesto were still the PCF's basic points of reference. Waldeck Rochet, the then leader of the PCF, made this point clear. "For so long", he wrote, "as the decisive means of production remain the property of monopolies, the organisation of production cannot be democratic; it can never correspond to the true social nature of productive forces. There can only be short-term palliatives to the contradictions of state monopoly capitalism" (Rochet, 1969, pp. 42-43). The economic, social and international dilemmas of the 1970s and 1980s mean that the party has since distanced itself from its Moscow-oriented roots. All the same, certain highly recognisable themes can be found in the PCF's most recent declaration of principles which was adopted at the 31st party congress in October 2001. Beginning with a familiar quotation, "'The emancipation of workers will be the task of the workers themselves'", the party asserted that "Over and above all the wounds of history and in ways that are yet to be invented, this communist ambition is still relevant" (www.pcf.fr, *Résolution sur le Projet communiste*, accessed 30 October 2001). More concretely, the party declared that "business is a range of powers that citizens must appropriate" (ibid). This language is most definitely still that of the statist left.

In addition to statist socialism, there has also been an anti-statist element to the socialist left. In the past this tradition was associated most clearly with the anarcho-syndicalist movement. In the latter part of the 19th century, writers such as Proudhon denounced both private ownership and state ownership: "humanity, like a drunken man, hesitates and staggers between two gulfs, on

one side property, on the other side community and statism; the question is knowing how it will cross this gorge” (quoted in Winock, 1992, p. 47). In more recent times, anti-statist socialism manifested itself most clearly in the Unified Socialist Party (the PSU) which was formed in 1960. The PSU came to be associated with what was called ‘the second left’ and, in particular, with the policy of *autogestion*, or self-management. The PSU’s 1972 manifesto summed up the parties thinking in both regards. The party refused an all-powerful state that was said to be characteristic of both the bourgeoisie and the Soviet Union (cited in Rocard, 1979, p. 102). At the same time, it promoted a “project” that would create a “society where men are able to take control of their own affairs, to take decisions that affect their work, lifestyle, training and relationships for themselves” (ibid, p. 102). This approach was different from the one taken by, for example, the Communist party at the time.

Now, though, the non-statist left expresses itself arguably most clearly in the form of the Greens.⁴ Admittedly, the Greens do not necessarily wish to associate themselves with the anti-statist socialist left. This is certainly the case for Alain Lipietz, the short-lived presidential candidate of the Greens in 2001 and prominent green writer and activist, who argues that ecologism transcends socialism and the left generally (Lipietz, 1995, pp. ix-xiv). That said, there are clear connections and similarities between green ideas and the anti-statist left. For example, Lipietz writes: “To save the planet and guarantee the rights of future generations, we must first work at putting back together today’s society – by face-to-face, participatory democracy, putting everybody in the picture while not ignoring opposing interests; by developing the basic values of individual autonomy, solidarity between all, and responsibility for life and for future generations” (ibid, p. 149).⁵ The environmental emphasis may provide the Greens with a distinctive voice, but the social vision that they emphasise has clear links back to some of the most long-standing themes of the anti-statist socialist left. However, to the extent that the Greens do not associate themselves with the socialist left, this article will leave them aside from now on.

The main organised expression of the left tradition is the Socialist party. The roots of the PS are unequivocally statist, as opposed to non-statist, and can be traced as far back as the scientific industrialism of Saint-Simon. What is more, the statist credentials of the PS were reaffirmed dramatically in the so-called ‘union of the left’, an alliance between the PS and the PCF in 1972 based upon the Common Programme for Government. In the Common Programme the two

parties committed themselves to a “break with capitalism” and declared that Marxism was the “principal theoretical contribution” that inspired the programme as a whole.⁶ In a similar vein, François Mitterrand declared around the same time that, although “nationalisations are not socialism” (Mitterrand, 1974, p. 87), “they are the decisive instrument for changing the system of power that is sought not only by socialists but by all free men who want to break the shackles of a system that organises, because it lives off, the exploitation of man by man” (ibid, p. 87). Indeed, in May 1981, at the time of Mitterrand’s successful presidential election campaign, the party remained true to the idea that only by increasing the scope of the public sector, including nationalisations, would the State be liberated from “the diktat of capital” (Mitterrand, 1981, p. 310). What is more, as late as May 1982 the newly elected socialist prime minister, Pierre Mauroy, was still in a position to declare that “nationalisations constitute, for us, a key lever, one of the conditions necessary for our economic revival” (Mauroy, 1982, p. 76). As with the PCF, this is clearly in the tradition of the statist left.

All the same, by the mid-1980s the socialists had changed their beliefs, moving irrevocably closer to the positions of the non-statist left in response to various dilemmas. The first change came in the 1970s and concerned dilemmas of democracy, participation and self-government. For example, at the same time as the party was promoting widespread nationalisations in the Common Programme, it was also promoting the principle of *autogestion*, the main idea of the second left. This led Chevènement, a leading PS figure at the time, to declare: “*autogestion* is true, living socialism” (Chevènement, 1974, p. 160). A similar point applies to the policy of decentralisation. At that time, it formed part of a package of measures that was designed to protect the citizen from an overbearing and centralised (read right-wing dominated) state. For example, at the 1981 presidential election itself, François Mitterrand made decentralisation one of his campaign themes. Under Section III of his 110 Proposals for France entitled “Freedom: For Responsible Women and Men”, proposal no. 54 promised that “decentralisation will be prioritised” and went on to outline a list of ways in which decentralisation would establish a “counter-power” within the system as a whole. All told, across a wide range of policy areas the Socialist party was questioning the relationship between the individual, or the citizen, and the state. The party was moving closer to the position of the non-statist left.

The second and perhaps more important change came in the 1980s and concerned economic dilemmas. Most notably, the party elite came to believe that

it had to operate in the context of a globalised economy in which the role of the market could not be ignored. So, for example, in the summer of 1983 Lionel Jospin, the then party leader, declared: “Reality has forced us to remember, clearly and harshly, that economic laws exist [...], the force of external constraints, the difficulty in adapting the system of production, all of this has shown us that realities change perhaps less slowly than we think [...], that the choices we make [...] can sometimes have negative consequences” (quoted in Derville, 1991, p. 39). The appointment of Laurent Fabius as prime minister in July 1984 reinforced this logic. Fabius was associated with the theme of “modernising and rallying together [*moderniser et rassembler*]”. He was the first to say officially that “the fight against unemployment will probably be long and difficult” (Fabius, 1985, p. 51). Moreover, he was also the first to indicate quite so forcefully that France had to “find a new role for the State” (ibid, p. 54) and to admit that the “State has reached its limits” and that it must not “go beyond them” (ibid, p. 55). In fact, this change in socialist thinking was best expressed, perhaps not surprisingly, by François Mitterrand himself. In his 1988 presidential election manifesto he declared: “I do not condemn at all times, in all places, the sovereign affirmation of the State: far from it. I, too, it seems to me, would have forged the armour which, from Philippe-Auguste to Colbert, from the *jacobins* to Bonaparte and Gambetta, Clemenceau and de Gaulle, has allowed the oldest nation in Europe to build itself up and to survive, bringing together in itself, up to our time, the virtues of the past and the promises of the future. But science, habits and styles have changed. Don’t allow us to be left behind” (Mitterrand, 1988, p. 52). In short, for Mitterrand, like Fabius before him, the context was posing new dilemmas in response to which the role of the state had to change. In this sense, the socialists had moved closer to the positions of the non-statist socialist left.

Against this background, the party’s current thinking is best captured by the long-standing distinction between method and application, or alternatively between the aspirations of socialism, on the one hand, and the problems of implementing socialist policies, on the other. This distinction has a considerable heritage within the socialist tradition generally and, needless to say, not just in France. All the same, in recent times the distinction between method and application has been expressed quite forcefully as a way of reasserting basic socialist principles while at the same reassuring voters that the party is prudent and can be trusted with the managing the country’s affairs. So, for example,

Lionel Jospin, the prime minister from 1997-2002, writes: “We have to say very clearly to socialists, to left-wing opinion, to the French, that our objectives are indeed full employment, material well-being, the reduction of income inequalities and more equitable international economic relations” (Jospin, 1991, p. 255). At the same time, he argues, once these objectives have been declared, “it is perfectly reasonable and even realistic to explain why we cannot easily reach them, what obstacles we encounter, why we are obliged to use such and such means – sometimes contradictory to the end we are trying to achieve – how it is possible and how long it will take us (prudently) to reach our goals” (ibid, pp. 255-56). In sum, for the PS the state is still considered to be a source of change. At the same time, though, as we shall see in the section on public sector reform, the state is deemed to be in need of change as well. This stance is the basic reason for the large degree of overlap between the contemporary left and right-wing narratives of public sector reform.

The right-wing traditions of governance

As on the left, so on the right. The right has always been divided. In his seminal work, Rémond (1982) argues that there are three distinct elements to the French right (bonapartism, *orléanisme* and what he calls *ultracisme*). These elements, he claims, have been present in French political life since the early 19th century, even if they have manifested themselves in different parties at various times. The result is that while the most basic divisions between the parties of the right find expression in short-term personal and issue-based conflicts, such conflicts hide three basic long-term ideological traditions. That said, this section will ignore the *ultraciste* tradition.⁷ This is because this tradition represents, in effect, the extreme-right wing element of French politics, the main contemporary manifestation of which is the National Front. Given the National Front has not been in government during the Fifth Republic and has shown little interest in the issue of public sector reform, the rest of this chapter will focus solely on the bonapartist and *orléaniste* traditions.

For Rémond (ibid, pp. 99-121), the bonapartist tradition on the right dates back to the period 1848-70 and the politics of Louis-Napoléon. This tradition promotes a personalised system of politics. Moreover, while it is fundamentally anti-left, it maintains a ‘neither-right-nor-left’ stance that is inherent in its populist appeal. Finally, the bonapartist tradition is concerned with order and

glory which leads it to promote a decisive role for the state. In modern times, this tradition has been maintained most vigorously by the gaullists. In this context, the personalised vision of politics has been expressed perhaps most clearly by the General himself. For example, in his memoirs he writes about his decision to return to power in 1958: “Notwithstanding the doubts which I felt about myself owing to my age – sixty-seven years – the gaps in my knowledge and my limited abilities; however stiff the obstacles I was sure to meet among our people, volatile as always and pulled in the opposite direction by almost the whole of the political, intellectual and social élite, and in spite of the resistance which foreign states would offer to the renascent power of France, I must, to serve her, personify this great national ambition” (de Gaulle, 1971, p. 19).⁸ The transcendent nature of gaullism was also associated clearly with de Gaulle. For example, in his famous speech at Bayeux on 16 June 1946, he declared: “The current world situation in which the powers – between which we are placed – confront one another behind opposing ideologies cannot fail to introduce into our political struggles a factor of impassioned agitation. In brief, party rivalry is a fundamental characteristic of our country, always questioning everything and before which, too often, the higher interests of the country are obscured” (cited in Quermonne, p. 630). Finally, the state-centric nature of gaullism was also underlined by de Gaulle. For him, the state was the legitimate expression of the national interest. Indeed, for the General order and grandeur could only be achieved through the (re-)construction of a strong state. So, for example, talking of France in 1958, he writes: “After the terrible decline which she had suffered for more than a hundred years she must use the respite which chance had accorded her to re-establish her power, her wealth and her influence in tune with the spirit of modern times. Failing this, a catastrophe on the scale of the century might one day crush her for ever. The means of this renewal were the State, progress and independence” (de Gaulle, 1971, p. 36).⁹ In this context, what needs to be reiterated is that gaullists support the state not because it is essential for the improvement of the human condition, but because a strong state is a necessary requirement for glory and national success. Thus, the gaullists share common cause with the left in this regard, but for a fundamentally different reason.

In the contemporary context, these themes are still identifiable in gaullist party thinking. That said, their precise manifestation is somewhat different. For example, the transcendent nature of gaullism is now most commonly associated with the championing of the Republic.¹⁰ This can be seen perhaps most clearly in

the writings of former party leader, Philippe Séguin. The republican idea, he writes, “belongs neither to a camp, a party, or a man. It transcends traditional cleavages ... precisely because it touches upon values, and not petty partisan interests, because it brings into play, over and above the work of this person or that, a conception of man and democracy” (Séguin, 1994, p. 14). In this context, the state still has a special role to play in gaullist party thinking. For example, in his successful presidential election campaign in 1995, Jacques Chirac stressed the importance of the ‘republican State’. “The republican State”, he argued, “is an impartial State, one that guarantees national cohesion and solidarity between citizens, between generations, between all parts of the territory” (Chirac, 1994, p. 81).

At the same time, though, gaullist attitudes towards the state are now somewhat more circumspect than they were during the early years of the de Gaulle presidency. Indeed, in the mid-1980s the gaullists toyed with neo-liberal ideas. So, for example, in 1987 the then Finance Minister, Édouard Balladur, declared: “I believe in Man more than the State. I believe in liberty” (Balladur, 1987, p. 10). All the same, Balladur still felt it necessary to point to the problems of what he termed the “ultra-liberal ideology” that “reduces man to himself without protection” (ibid., p. 70). The same was true five years later. While the future prime minister was still full of praise for the idea of liberty (Balladur, 1992, pp. 183-91), at the same time he argued that the “time is no longer right for simplistic ideas: accordingly the cult of liberty does not sweep away the refusal to recognise that the State has a role to play in society. If this were the case, then it would be a new illusion, and one bound to fail, paving the way for a return to socialism which today quite rightly has been discredited” (ibid, pp. 112-13).

Thus, for present-day gaullists the state, as the incarnation of the national interest and in line with the traditional republican model, remains an essential element of the French tradition of governance. Even so, gaullists believe that currently the State is not working well and needs to be reformed. This theme goes back to the late 1960s and, in particular, to the ideas put forward by Jacques Chaban-Delmas, the gaullist prime minister from 1969-72. In his ‘new society’ programme, he argued that social change had not been matched by political change. What was needed, he argued, was to “take note of the seriousness of the blockages, resulting from 150 years of economic weakness, bureaucratic centralisation and social conservatism, that paralyse the evolution of the country in all areas at all levels” (Chaban-Delmas, 1976, p. 345). For Chaban, the

“tentacular” (ibid., p. 346) and “omnipresent” (ibid., p. 347) nature of the state was one of the key dilemmas that the country faced and state reform was one of his key policy proposals. This sort of language marked a radical departure for such a leading gaullist figure. More recently, former prime minister, Alain Juppé, declared: “In a complicated, changing and open world, we need the State. I would like to adopt this slogan: ‘Long live the State!’ Gaullists respect the State. But we aspire to a State that helps people” (Juppé, 1996, pp. 99-100). Equally, Chirac has exclaimed: “Give us back our State! ... I demand that the State, where necessary, should be present, more enterprising, more voluntaristic ...” (Chirac, 1994, p. 69). The state is still a basic reference point. At the same time, though, there is now a desire to reform the state so as to make it work better.

By contrast, the *orléaniste* tradition has traditionally had a different starting point (Rémond, 1982, pp. 84-98). Finding its origins in the period 1830-48 the *orléaniste* tradition was originally associated with the desire for a constitutional monarchy. That said, if the *orléanistes* wanted a monarchy they nonetheless wanted a modern and lay monarchy (ibid, p. 87). They were inspired by liberalism as a political and economic philosophy. In this way, while they were profoundly bourgeois and anti-left, at the same time they were opposed to the *ultracisme* of the extreme-right and the personalised, republican state-centred discourse of the bonapartists. In the contemporary context, one strand of *orléanisme* is the neo-liberalism of the Liberal Democracy party (DL). DL is an explicitly neo-liberal party. In its basic ideas’ document, the party declares that for years “France has been procrastinating, hesitating. It has refused the liberal choices that everywhere else in world have led to employment, prosperity and new-found confidence” (*Les dix choix forts pour la France*, <http://www.demlib.com>, accessed 31 October 2001). The party leader, Alain Madelin, has built on this theme in his work. In his 1995 book, *Quands les autruches releverons la tête* (Paris, Robert Laffont), he writes: “nothing must be done by a public organisation that can be done by people themselves, families, businesses or associations. Nothing must be done by the centralised State that can be done at the level of local authorities. Finally, nothing must be done at the European level that can be done by France” (<http://www.demlib.com>, accessed 31 October 2001). He goes on to say: “It would be wrong to reduce France to the State, like it would be wrong to refuse our nation-state heritage. We did not choose it, no more than we chose our parents. But it would be an error not to try to reconstruct our republican State” (<http://www.demlib.com>, accessed 31

October 2001). All told, while there is a basic consensus about the need for state reform, Madelin's emphasis is somewhat different from gaullist beliefs.

In the current context, however, DL is a relatively isolated strand of the *orléaniste* tradition. The party stands out because of its unashamedly liberal agenda. The mainstream strand of the *orléaniste* tradition has adopted a more measured tone. This moderation can be seen in the work of the former president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. During the course of his presidency (1974-81), Giscard outlined in great detail the changing nature of French society, arguing, like Chaban-Delmas before him, that it had been hit by "a sort of hurricane" (Giscard d'Estaing, 1978, p. 39) in the previous couple of decades. Moreover, he too talked of the "tentacular" (*ibid.*, p. 16) nature of the French State and argued that there was a need for a "profound change of administrative practice" (*ibid.*, p. 97) with a "new style of language and action" (*ibid.*, p. 98). At the same time, though, Giscard also adopted a recognisably statist tone. For example, he talked of the need for a system of "flexible planning, 'French-style'", which he considered to be "the manifestation of French democracy in the economic domain" (Giscard d'Estaing, 1978, p. 132). Moreover, as fervently as the president denounced Marxism, so too he denounced the failings of modern-day liberalism (*ibid.*, pp. 56-58). Instead, he argued: "state intervention can constitute, as a last resort, not a threat to freedom, but the real guarantee of liberty for the weakest in society" (*ibid.*, p. 57). Overall, Giscard clearly belongs to the mainstream strand of the *orléaniste* tradition, because, for him, liberalism is the cornerstone of political and economic progress (*ibid.*, p. 56). At the same time, he is critical of liberalism. On the one hand, he believes that the system is not liberal enough and competition has been stifled (*ibid.*, p. 57). On the other hand, he believes that the state should intervene to protect people from the "blind forces" (*ibid.*, p. 130) of market competition.

The final strand within the contemporary *orléaniste* tradition is Christian Democracy (Rémond, 1982, pp. 308-11). At one level there is a basic difference between the liberal and Christian Democratic elements of the *orléaniste* tradition. For the former, the individual is the basic unit of analysis. For the latter, though, the person is the centre of intellectual attention. As the party declared in 1990: "The person is unique. Nothing in the political order is above her. Neither race, nor social class, nor the Nation, nor the State, nor any organisation that can impose its logic on a man" (Centre des Démocrates Sociaux, 1990, p. 3).¹¹ The importance of personalism means that Christian Democrats have stressed the

social structures within which personal development takes place. They have promoted the role of the family as the basic social unit within which people develop. They have also emphasised the role of all the other social structures where people interact and can develop to their full potential. So, they have stressed the importance of the workplace, the neighbourhood, the community and social groups, such as trade unions. "The person is not alone", the party put it at its 1990 convention, "Family, city, business, association and Nation form us as much as we form them" (ibid, p. 3). Indeed, this focus on the nation is reflected in the importance that is also placed on the position of the nation in the international community, the international family of nations, as well: "The Christian conception of Man reminds us of his fraternal and universal character ... Christian Democrats must be the pioneers when it comes to relations between rich and poor countries" (ibid., p. 4).

In this context, what results is in one sense a quite distinct political philosophy. Indeed, in the immediate post-war period the Christian Democrats promoted what they called a "*troisième voie*", or third way, between liberalism on the one side and collectivism on the other, leading them to promote elements of both. Thereafter, in a 1984 interview the former prime minister and future presidential candidate Raymond Barre put forward some by now familiar sounding ideas.¹² "France", he says, "is currently undergoing a period of profound change: the socio-political model which predominated during the years of rapid growth is coming to an end. We are moving towards something else. What? I cannot say precisely. But I believe that the French are being carried along on a general movement of ideas towards more liberty and individual initiative, towards a limitation of the role of the State and the search for a greater efficiency in the State's activities, towards a broader diffusion of its responsibilities" (Barre, 1984). He goes on: "I am not an ideologue. I am in favour of a liberal society, which is based on pluralism and which gives individuals a freedom to choose ... In terms of the economy, I am in favour of a market economy but with intervention by the State, which is responsible for fundamental equilibriums, in the medium and long-term, and based not on controls, rules and subsidies, but global regulations and incentives" (ibid). All told, the sense, once more, is that the French system of governance is changing as a response to a series of dilemmas. These dilemmas will require that the state be reformed. At the same time, though, they will not mean that the state becomes redundant. On the contrary, the state will continue to have a key role to play in

regulating individual and social activity. Clearly, then, whatever the differences between the various traditions of governance in contemporary France, there are also common elements to many of them as well.

NARRATIVES OF PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE

The previous section identified some of the similarities and differences between and within both the left and right-wing traditions of governance. It also identified some of the basic dilemmas that have caused these traditions to change over time. This section examines these traditions more closely by focusing on the some of the similarities and the differences in the contemporary left and right-wing narratives of public sector reform. Here, the aim is not to outline the policies of the left and the right in this regard, but to identify the beliefs that underpin some of the most basic policy positions. These beliefs help to explain the actions of left and right-wing parties in office. In the domain of public sector reform, they constitute the response to the dilemmas with which the various traditions have been faced in recent years.

Separate traditions, common narratives

In terms of public sector reform, the basic commonality between the left and the right concerns the need to render the state more responsive to the needs and desires of citizens. On the right, as outlined above, people like Chaban-Delmas and Giscard were making statements of this sort in the mid-1970s. However, in this context, perhaps the most important work of this era was the book by the leading gaullist party figure, Alain Peyrefitte (1976a; and 1976b). Peyrefitte identified what he called 'the French disease'. The cause of this disease, he argued, was the state. "Since the State has taken hold of all authority", he writes, "the French hold it responsible for everything. Ordinary citizens, local representatives and civil servants blame the central power for everything because they are subjected to it ... The French disease can be found in the essence of this paradox. Responsible for everything, the government is faced with general protests. It deals with too many details for it to be rid of the whole thing. Because it intervenes directly in the most concrete tasks, it is sought after for the most abstract demands" (Peyrefitte, 1976b, p. 604). For Peyrefitte, the remedy

was a profound reform of the state. “In place of the monolithic, independent and introverted ‘houses’”, he wrote, “we might see a better aerated administration appear. More lively, because the working methods could vary from one department to another; there would be room for a more fecund diversity. More homogeneous, because in the context of a department the current compartmentalisations could be broken allowing the circulation between services to become easier and more intense. Finally, more open, because under the close watch of elected representatives the spirit of service would blow more strongly and the needs and aspirations of citizens would exert pressure more efficiently” (ibid., p. 914). In Peyrefitte’s work, therefore, what we see is a plea for more open government, more consumer-oriented government and for more joined-up government. At the same time, though, Peyrefitte was not anti-state. Indeed, his list of essential state functions is quite ranging: “The State must remain in charge of foreign relations, defence, internal and external security, economic policy, the budget, taxation, law making and the respect for law, national infrastructure, telecommunications, territorial development, the main public sector businesses, research priorities ...” (ibid., p. 909).

By the mid-1970s, therefore, the right was clearly ready for what would later be known as the new public management, even if it was a state-centred French-style vision of the new public management. By the 1990s this set of beliefs was common currency. For example, in 1993 the incoming prime minister, Édouard Balladur, reiterated the argument that too often “citizens have the feeling that the State is owned by but that it is not served by those who govern” (*Déclaration de politique générale*, in *Le Monde*, 10 April, 1993). Indeed, a similar point was made by Balladur’s successor, Alain Juppé, who argued that “modernising the State means bringing it closer to the citizen” (*Déclaration de politique générale*, in *Le Monde*, 25 May, 1995) and stated that “we have to think of [our citizens]. The state is at their service” (ibid). In this context, the public management approach increasingly found its way into various official documents, such as the right-wing commissioned reports on State reform (Picq, 1995) and the public service (Denoix de Saint Marc, 1996). Here, the focus was on the citizen as a consumer of public sector goods. So, for example, the Denoix de Saint Marc report concluded by saying that “current organisation of national public services must be improved to as satisfy the social needs of consumers better and to develop the competitiveness of businesses” (Denoix de Saint Marc, 1996, p. 78). More generally, this point was emphasised by Balladur in his speech

that inaugurated the Picq committee: “First and foremost”, he declared, “the French want the work of the State to be more intelligible and better organised and they want the conditions under which decisions are investigated and taken to be more clearly established. Equally, they want the duties of those who serve the State to be better defined and the ways in which the administration works to be modernised” (Picq, 1995, p. 5). This situation, Balladur argued, must lead to the committee proposing “the necessary structural regroupings and reductions that will create a more efficient State. It must also lead to imaginative forms of interministerial work that will create a more efficient response to the new needs that will emerge” (ibid, p. 6). At the same time, though, the need to adopt such an approach did not mean that the right had rejected the state. Far from it. The state needed to be reformed, it was argued, so that it can carry out its essential tasks more efficiently. Again, what is noticeable is that for most of the right the essential tasks of the state remain quite extensive. For example, when he announced the creation of a committee on state reform, Balladur declared that the state’s duties concern amongst other things “the means to ensure the harmony of the territory, the fight against unemployment and the main social scourges, training, the support and regulation of economic activity, as well as the security of France and the French and the defence of French interests in Europe and the world (ibid, p. 3). All told, this list of responsibilities goes far beyond a neo-liberal night-watchman state. For most of the right, gaullist and *orléaniste* alike, the state is currently imperfect, but it is still an essential element of the French tradition of governance.

On the left, the situation is similar. Until the late 1980s the socialists had little interest in what would now be called new public management issues. True, they were extremely concerned with reforming the relationship between the state and society, but, as noted above, from 1981-88 these concerns were directed towards issues such as rights and civil liberties, the liberalisation of the broadcasting sector and, particularly, decentralisation. As a result, in 1981 Mitterrand’s 110 proposals for France contained nothing that even remotely resembled the logic of the new public management thinking. By the late 1980s, though, the situation had changed. The left’s *aggiornamento* in this regard came with the appointment as prime minister in May 1988 of one of the former leader’s of the second-left, or non-statist socialist left tradition, Michel Rocard. Immediately on taking office, Rocard took the unusual step of issuing a circular to his ministerial colleagues (“A new state of mind for governing differently” –

in *Regards sur l'Actualité*, no. 143, 1988) in which he outlined the basic rules of government procedure.¹³ This document reiterated the by now familiar-sounding argument that the “State apparatus has become too distant from civil society” (Rocard, 1989, p. 100). Six weeks later, when presenting his government to the National Assembly, Rocard built on this theme, arguing that “French society has evolved more rapidly than the political system” (*Déclaration de politique générale*, in *Le Monde*, 1 July 1988). As a result, in the May 1988 circular he instructed ministers to encourage all the administrative elements placed under their control “to make themselves more available to citizens (opening hours, access to counters, the personalisation of administrative contacts ...)” (Rocard, 1989, p. 103). Similarly, in his statement to the National Assembly he talked about the need to repair broken-down lifts, entry halls and letter boxes and to redecorate council housing. Indeed, this change of tone was reinforced by the well known circular of public sector reform that Rocard issued in February 1989 (JO 24/2/89, pp. 2526-2529). In this document, the critique of the state was couched in a language that would be familiar and acceptable to the right. He wrote: “The conditions in which [the State’s] missions are carried out today are ... hardly satisfactory ... for citizens and businesses who are simultaneously, depending on the circumstances, the governed, users, clients, consumers or taxpayers, and who are confronted by a State which is too concentrated in its workings, too compartmentalised in its structures, too fragmented in its actions and which has not taken sufficient account of the effects of decentralisation” (ibid, p. 2536). At the same time, though, Rocard, like Balladur subsequently, was still attached to the role of the state as a necessary and indeed positive force in the organisation of French governance. For example, in the same circular he wrote: “What is at stake today, as most French people see it, is the fundamental role that the State and the public services must play. They must be capable of ensuring, in the best conditions of equity and efficiency, indispensable tasks, guaranteeing republican values, defending the general interest and promoting economic and social progress” (ibid, p. 2536). So, he holds a peculiarly state-centred view of new public management. So, for example, a couple of years earlier he had preached the benefits of moving from a ‘producer-State’ to a ‘regulator-State’ and from a ‘powerful State’ to a ‘watchman State’ (Rocard, 1987, p. 249). At the same time, though, Rocard still felt that the state had to carry out three basic tasks: “ensuring basic securities by an active solidarity (freedoms, health, pensions ...); preventing or reducing economic disequilibria; maintaining

the means by which the future can be prepared (training and research, principally)" (Rocard, *ibid.*, p. 250). These are not the beliefs of the old-style statist left. At the same time, though, they still ascribe to the state a major role in the organisation of good governance.

Thereafter, the tone of the socialist narrative on public sector reform was set. For example, in his 1995 presidential election manifesto, Lionel Jospin made explicit reference to the reform process that had begun in 1988 and justified both the need for reform and the role that he believed a reformed state should play in similar terms to Rocard. "To be more respected", he argued, "the State must be better understood. To be better understood, the State must be reformed ... The French want an impartial and understandable State, a State capable of thinking and acting efficiently, a State which understands their demands and expectations. It is necessary to clarify the role of the State and to restore the very idea of public service. Public service has an essential role in combating social and territorial inequalities (in particular by being present in rural areas), for maintaining national cohesion. Public service must be defended and renewed. Its founding principles – impartiality, neutrality, secularity, simplified access, equal treatment – must be respected. I intend to continue and amplify the policy that was begun in 1988 of modernising the State and simplifying rules to make them more accessible to citizens" (Jospin, 1995, pp. 115-16). In government, Jospin reiterated his convictions. In 1998 he issued a similar circular to Rocard's in which he set out the government's continuing programme of administrative reform. This document included a commitment that the administration would improve the way in which it listened to and welcomed the users of public services (JO 131, 3/6/98, p. 8703). More significantly still, in July 1998 the prime minister followed up this circular with a decree (no. 98-573, JO 159, 11/7/98, p. 10687) that amended the institutional structures relating to public sector reform. As part of this reform programme, Jospin emphasised the need to pay much more attention to the way in which the state "listened to and welcomed" the users of services (*ibid.*). To this end, the government committed itself to the setting of appropriate quality indicators, the evaluation of policy and the general way in which the state defined its relationship with users (*ibid.*). In fact, the important point about this decree is not just that it fits in very much with the agenda originally set by Michel Rocard in 1988, but that it simply adapted the 1995 decree (no. 95-1007, JO 214, 14/9/95, p. 13558) that was issued by Jospin's right-wing predecessor, Alain Juppé. In short, in terms of identifying the basic

elements of public sector reform the socialists' narrative is not only different now from the one with which it was associated prior to the late 1980s, it is also similar to the equivalent narrative on the right.

Common traditions, separate narratives

It is apparent, therefore, that the main elements of the left and right share a common narrative of public sector reform. There are dissenting voices. These differences are confined to the more marginal parties. At the same time, though, they are worth exploring however briefly because they provide some alternative to the mainstream point of view.

On the right, the principal outlier is DL. The party has paid particular attention to issues of public sector reform. In this regard, the management-oriented discourse of the right generally has provided common cause with DL. Moreover, for its part DL has argued that the French state needs to be reformed so that it can perform better. However, the party has differentiated itself somewhat from the rest of the right in terms of its attitudes towards the role of the state generally. "Let us ask the right questions", the party has stated, "do not let us ask any longer what the State must give, but what it must stop taking. Do not let us ask what it must do, but what it must stop doing" (www.demlib.com, *Réforme de l'État, La réforme de l'État*, accessed 6 November 2001). In this context, DL's list of what it considers to be the state's essential tasks is relatively small. What the party expected from its political leaders, it declared, was that they "change the State, notably by freeing it of its less useful tasks so that it can mobilise its resources in a more efficient way on the essential tasks that are necessary incumbent upon it (Justice, law and order, defence ...)" (www.demlib.com, *Réforme de l'État, Alléger l'État*, accessed 6 November 2001). This list is perfectly compatible with a neo-liberal vision of the state, but nevertheless it is somewhat different from the dominant narrative of the right in this regard.

On the left, the main dissent comes from the statist left. While the communists now at least acknowledge the need for public sector reform, the tone in which they couch this policy is somewhat different from the dominant socialist discourse. For example, at the party's 31st congress, the official resolution stated: "The driving force of the public sector, its impact and its influence on society, its capacity to allow international cooperation, its dominant

role in a shared social control of credit, will be proportional to its ability to modernise. We call for the enlargement of the public sector” (www.pcf.fr, *Résolution sur le Projet communiste*, accessed 6 November 2001). By contrast, the main emphasis of the MDC concerns the need to maintain the equal provision of public services across the national territory. The party’s position in this regard is crystal clear: “The French notion of public service is in effect based on the idea that the services needed by all citizens (hospitals, justice, education, police, post or telephones, railways, social security ...) must be available at whatever point on the national territory at an identical price for all by way of a system of cross-subsidisation ... This principle of public service is completely at odds with the liberal logic that tends to differentiate between different categories of users. This is the way in which the principle of equality between all citizens is called into question” (www.mdc-france.org/positions/pospub.html#secteurpub1, accessed 6 November 2001). This logic is in line with the party’s espousal of what it considers to be the traditional republican model of government. Like the Communist party’s attitudes previously, this places the party at odds with the dominant socialist narrative and, indeed, with the dominant narrative of public sector reform more generally.

Separate traditions, separate narratives

While there are variations within both the left and the right, the main difference between the dominant left and right-wing narratives of public sector reform springs from the beliefs that representatives of the two traditions hold about public servants. For the left, the qualities of civil servants are stressed and an emphasis is placed on negotiated reform. On the right, there is still a certain hostility towards public servants and at times this hostility manifests itself in a certain anti-technocratic populism.

On the left, the attitude towards civil servants is generally positive. This statement is true both for the main representatives of the statist left, the communists, and for the socialists as well. We must not be naive about this support. At least one of the reasons for their attitude is that public sector workers disproportionately support the left. Thus, the left is merely safeguarding one of its main electoral constituencies when it praises public sector workers. All the same, in so doing, it espouses, and probably holds, views different to those of the right. Generally, when the socialists have proposed public sector reform they

have also praised the role of public servants. So, for example, in his 1989 circular, Rocard stressed that the state's missions are not being carried out satisfactorily for public servants who, he argued "in the past have too often been neglected, indeed forgotten or unjustly criticised" (JO 24/2/89, p. 2526). A similar view has been adopted by Lionel Jospin. He has stated: "It is not the quality of the work of civil servants which is in question. This is widely appreciated and quite rightly. It is the global functioning of the administration which is perceived to be too distant, too bureaucratic, too impenetrable" (Jospin, 1995, p. 115). This distinction between the people who operate within the system and the system itself is characteristic of the socialist left.

Against this background, for the left concertation has gone hand-in-hand with public sector reform since the late 1980s. For example, when talking about what was necessary in order to reform the country, Rocard emphasised the need for "... social compromise, government by dialogue, negotiation rather than administrative commands, [and] the convergent action of local and national representatives to ensure the quality of the public service and the environment ..." (Rocard, 1989, p. 13). For her part, Rocard's successor, Edith Cresson, also stressed this theme. "Let this not be misunderstood", she declared in relation to her plans for state reform, "collective negotiation between responsible partners is truly the very foundation of social relations in this country" (*Déclaration de politique générale*, in *Le Monde*, 24 May, 1991). More recently still, this same theme was reiterated by Lionel Jospin. Talking about the renovation of the public service, he said: "These reforms must gain the support of civil servants. The quality of the public sector workers and the sense of responsibility of public servants are the best ways of ensuring that the state reform programme succeeds. We will put an end to the policy of cutting back on jobs in the public sector" (*Déclaration de politique générale*, in *Le Monde*, 21 June 1997). Finally, section III of the June 1998 circular on public sector was entitled "Improving the management of human resources" and included a series of measures designed to appeal to public sector workers (JO 131, 3/6/98, p. 8703).

By contrast, the emphasis on the right is different. While there is still a belief that the state has a not inconsiderable role to play in relation to society, the language that surrounds this belief is noticeably more accusatory than the contemporary left-wing narrative. For example, as noted in the previous section, Jacques Chirac was keen to invoke the traditional image of the Republican State, one that was impartial and that promoted the general will. At the same time,

though, there was also a much clearer sense than on the left that public servants were being judged negatively. In early 1996 he stated: "The State does not have to be modest. Those who serve the State have the duty to be modest. The State, for its part, must be great" (quote in Chevallier, 1996, p. 204, n. 51). Indeed, a similar sort of inspiration can also be found in official texts. For instance, in 1994 Balladur established a special commission under the direction of Simone Rozès to examine the issue of political corruption. In the final document, a considerable number of the report's 27 specific reform proposals related to ways in which the corrupt practices of civil servants could be prevented.¹⁴ In a somewhat different register, the 1995 Juppé circular on State reform stated: "France enjoys a very high quality administration and public services. However, this quality does not exempt them from adapting to the aspirations of our fellow citizens ..." (JO 174, 28/7/95, p. 11217). Here, the language is banal. The fact remains, though, that the basic tone is still accusatory. In this respect, it points to beliefs different from those generally associated with the left.

In fact, this point can be seen even more clearly when it comes to the issue of technocracy. There is no doubt that there have long been criticisms of the supposed system of rule by technocrats in France. For example, in his description of the French disease, Alain Peyrefitte singled out technocrats for particular attention (Peyrefitte, 1976a, pp. 419-39). However, Philippe Séguin denounced technocrats in perhaps the most entertaining manner as part of a general criticism of civil servants. Civil servants, he argued "can be divided, as everyone knows, into two main categories: on the one hand, those who serve no purpose whatsoever and who are by far and away the most numerous; on the other hand, those who want to run the whole show and whose appetite for power explains the omnipresence of the State. The latter are the more targeted; we might be able to get along with bureaucrats, but as for technocrats, no quarter! If you ever need to get a lacklustre or sleepy audience going at a public meeting, all you have to do is to denounce the psychopaths who think they are serving the State but who really are only looking to serve themselves" (Séguin, 1985, p. 100).

In recent years these beliefs re-emerged clearly in 1992 at the time of the referendum on the Maastricht Treaty. At this time, Séguin, the *de facto* leader of the 'no' campaign, consistently argued that one of the reasons for rejecting the Treaty was that Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) would lead to government by technocrats. "My European battle", he argued, "is not a matter of partisan cleavages or tactical considerations. It is a battle for the values in which I

believe, a battle for the Republic. By defending the idea of a political Europe against a technocratic Europe, of a solidaristic Europe against a monetaristic Europe, of an organised Europe against a Europe which is open to all points of the compass, *I firmly believe that I am being faithful to inspiration of the founding fathers of the Community*" (Séguin, 1994, p. 28).¹⁵ Thereafter, Séguin's argument developed into a criticism of the governance of France more generally. This criticism centred on the theme of "*la pensée unique*", or mind set, based on the notion that one of the main causes of the problems with which France was faced was that country's decision-makers, most of whom had been to one of the *grandes écoles*, all went about problem-solving in the same way. The result, so the argument went, was stagnation and a lack of policy-making initiative. In the 1995 presidential election, Chirac took up a similar theme. So, for example, in his campaign literature Chirac argued: "This mind set that claims to control everything rests on the superiority of technocracy and the mastery of the centres of decision-making and influence. A technocracy to which politics has given over most of its authority, because of a lack of will and because it was easy to do so" (Jacques Chirac, *La France pour tous*, p. 6). There is, of course, a considerable degree of irony in the fact that Chirac himself went to ENA. Moreover, the irony increases when it is appreciated that once elected Chirac fervently supported the type of thinking that only a few months previously he had denounced. Indeed, this shift was a source of tension between Chirac and Séguin for a considerable period thereafter. Nevertheless, the fact remains that in recent times the right has been more associated with an anti-technocratic discourse than the left. In this sense, the two main traditions of governance in France have diverged in respect to their narratives of public sector reform.

CONCLUSION

In France, as elsewhere, the economic, social and international dilemmas of the last 30 years has brought the left and the right closer together. In terms of public sector reform, the left and the right now both agree that the state needs to be brought closer to the citizen and that citizens should be viewed as consumers of public services and treated accordingly. The fact that the left and the right now share this common narrative of governance should mean that the process of public sector reform will be continued in the years to come. All the same, there remain differences of emphasis between the right and the left and, indeed, within

both the right and the left, differences that are important in terms of how the reform process is perceived and, indeed, undertaken. Moreover, within both the left and the right there are some perhaps more fundamental divergences. Of course, the extent to which these dissenting voices will be able to influence the political debate is at least in part a function of the wider political context. However, the presence of alternative views is perhaps welcome against a background in which there is otherwise so much consensus.

Notes

¹ Indeed, the list could be extended further still. For example, in Lyon, the second-largest city in France, an off-shoot of the Liberal Democracy party, the Liberal-Christian Right, is an important actor with national-level ambitions.

² Except where indicated, all translations are by the author.

³ Winock (1992, p. 41) believes the term 'anti-statist' to be problematic, but cannot suggest a better alternative.

⁴ It should be noted that Winock does not include the Greens in his analysis of the anti-statist socialist tradition.

⁵ Cited in translation.

⁶ For a review of the discourse of the Common Programme, see Derville (1991, pp. 32-33).

⁷ For Rémond (1982, pp. 46-71), the *ultracisme* tradition dates back to the period 1815-30. This tradition was explicitly counter-revolutionary. It promoted the concept of the natural order, history and tradition. It was associated with the family, the church and natural hierarchies.

⁸ Cited in translation.

⁹ Cited in translation.

¹⁰ This emphasis has led to repeated speculation that there might be room for a political alliance between the MDC, on the one hand, and elements of the gaullist party and, especially, its nationalist off-shoot, the RPF, on the other.

¹¹ The Centre des Démocrates Sociaux was the immediate forerunner of the FD party which is now the main component of the UDF.

¹² It should be noted that Barre has never been a member of any party. Moreover, he was appointed as prime minister by Giscard, a liberal, in 1976, while on various occasions he has been accused of displaying certain gaullist tendencies. At the same time, Barre associated himself with the Christian Democrats perhaps more closely than any other party and he was certainly embraced by the Christian Democrats as the principal representative of this tradition during the 1980s.

¹³ In 1997 prime minister Jospin issued a similar document (JO 131, 7/6/97, p. 1970).

¹⁴ A full list of the proposals can be found in *Regards sur l'Actualité*, no. 207, Jan. 1995.

¹⁵ Italics in the original.

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