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Raymond Kuhn

The Raffarin premiership has been characterized by the following features: the institutional subordination of the Prime Minister to the President; the lack of authority of the Prime Minister both inside the government and within the ranks of the parliamentary majority; the introduction of controversial reforms in a variety of policy fields; the attempt to establish a 'communicative premiership'; and growing unpopularity culminating in the electoral backlash of 2004. With specific reference to these features, this article provides a critical evaluation of the Raffarin premiership as a case study of failed political leadership.

Keywords: French Executive; French Right; Raffarin Premiership

Introduction

The re-election of Jacques Chirac as President in 2002 and the victory of the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP) in the subsequent parliamentary election marked the start of a new period of coordinated executive rule after five years of cohabitation between a President of the right and a government of the 'plural left' led by Lionel Jospin. The appointment of Jean-Pierre Raffarin as Prime Minister symbolized the start of a new phase in Chirac's presidential tenure. Yet, despite an auspicious beginning, Raffarin's premiership has in many respects failed to live up to the expectations of the President, UMP deputies and militants, and that section of the electorate which voted for the moderate right in 2002.

This article analyses and evaluates the first two years of the Raffarin premiership (May 2002 to July 2004) as a case of failed political leadership. In particular, it argues that Raffarin's tenure of the Prime Minister's office has been characterized by failure across the following four leadership dimensions: head of government and leader of the parliamentary majority; policy coordinator; communicator in the mediated public sphere; election campaign leader.

Raffarin's Appointment as Prime Minister

The circumstances surrounding the re-election of Chirac to the presidency have been covered in comprehensive detail elsewhere (*Revue Politique et Parlementaire* 2002; Perrineau & Ysmal 2003; Gaffney 2004). However, four points linked to the 2002 presidential contest are particularly worth noting here because they influenced—or at the very least provided the immediate context for—the appointment of Raffarin to the premiership. First, the result of the first round provoked a sense of crisis among mainstream political forces. The progression of the National Front leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, to the second round, the humiliating and unexpected elimination of Jospin, the growth in abstention and the rise in protest voting for both extreme left and extreme right confirmed the very low levels of public confidence in France's established political elites which had long been evident in opinion polls. Second, Chirac's 19.9 percent share of the vote in the first round was the smallest ever recorded by an incumbent President in the Fifth Republic. Third, the decisive second round in which Chirac secured a massive 82.2 percent of the vote in the run-off against Le Pen had been transformed from a competitive electoral contest into a referendum on the defence of Republican values against the challenge of the extreme right. Finally, Chirac therefore lacked both a clear popular mandate for his policy proposals and the full legitimacy usually bestowed on the successful candidate by a proper election victory.

In line with constitutional precedent (Duhamel 2003a, pp. 187–204), Chirac's re-election gave the President the opportunity to appoint a new Prime Minister in advance of the parliamentary elections that were scheduled to follow a few weeks after the presidential contest. The choice of Raffarin might be seen as surprising, since he was not a political heavyweight, he lacked significant ministerial experience and he had a limited public profile. Illustrating his lack of front-rank status, in an opinion poll conducted three months prior to Chirac's victory, Raffarin came only eighth in a list of personalities of the right from whom the public wanted Chirac to select his Prime Minister, well behind better-known figures such as Alain Juppé, Nicolas Sarkozy, François Bayrou, Philippe Douste-Blazy and Alain Madelin (TNS Sofres 2002). Even among voters sympathetic to the right, Raffarin came no higher in the ranking order.

Despite these apparent handicaps, Raffarin's appointment can be explained with reference to three main factors (Méchet 2002). First, unlike many of his predecessors at Matignon of both right and left, Raffarin was not a member of one of the administrative *grands corps* and so did not carry the unpopular mantle of being an out-of-touch technocrat (Elgie 2003, p. 147). Instead he was a politician who made much of his local roots and of his links with the ordinary French voter—'La France d'en bas' (Ysmal 2004, pp. 72–73). The memory of the failure of Juppé, Chirac's first Prime Minister (1995–1997), to conduct an effective social dialogue prior to and during the protest strikes of late 1995 still struck a raw nerve with the President. With Raffarin successfully projecting an image as an 'ordinary man of the people', his appointment to the premiership was thus imbued with symbolic significance as evidence of the desire of Chirac that the new government should connect with the electorate.

Second, Raffarin had not been a member of the leading party of the moderate right, the Gaullist *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR), but instead had belonged to one of the smaller constituent parties of the right-wing coalition, *Démocratie libérale* (Sauger 2003). As a result, although he had fully supported Chirac's candidacy in 2002, Raffarin was not associated with the infighting that had marked the history of the RPR since the Balladur-Chirac rivalry of the 1995 presidential contest. With Chirac wanting to emphasize the broad nature of the right-wing parliamentary support for his presidency at a time when the different parties of the moderate right were for the most part coming together in a new single formation, the UMP, the choice of Raffarin symbolized a reaching out by the President beyond the narrow ranks of the party he himself had founded over a quarter of a century before.

Finally, in contrast to Sarkozy, one of the other leading contenders for the post of Prime Minister in 2002, Raffarin was strikingly uncharismatic and did not look to be a potential rival to Chirac at the head of the executive. He did not have the reputation for harbouring any presidential ambitions, nor was he widely regarded as a potential future presidential candidate (*présidentiable*). Once in office Raffarin himself stated—surely without any sense of false modesty—that he had no career goals beyond the premiership.¹ Chirac may thus have been reassured that Raffarin would present no competitive threat as the former sought to (re)construct his presidential image in the wake of the disastrous parliamentary dissolution of 1997 and the financial scandals that had marked his first term in office.

Though appointed by the President, a Prime Minister needs to be able to command a majority in the National Assembly if government is to be stable and effective. The parliamentary elections that followed the 2002 presidential contest were 'ratification' elections, where the electorate turned its back on the option of another bout of executive cohabitation by confirming the presidential result. The Raffarin government emerged from the elections with a huge majority in the National Assembly, based on the single-party hegemony of the UMP (see Table 1). The vast majority of government ministers also came from the ranks of the new party, with only one front-rank minister—Gilles de Robien (Equipment and Transport)—from its centre-right UDF rival. In addition, the new 'catch-most' party of the right secured a majority in the Senate in late 2002, while supporters of the President also held the upper hand on the Constitutional Council and the broadcasting regulatory authority, *Le Conseil Supérieur*

Table 1 2002 French Parliamentary Election Result: Seats

Moderate right	399	Moderate left	178
UMP	369	Socialists	141
UDF	22	<i>Radicaux de gauche</i>	7
Other right	8	Communists	21
		Greens	3
		Other left	6

Source: *Le Monde*, 18 June 2002

de l'Audiovisuel. This dominance of the regime at the national level by a single, albeit fragile, political force was unparalleled in the history of the Fifth Republic.

Raffarin's Failure as Head of Government and Leader of the *Majorité*

Raffarin's role as head of government needs to be situated first of all within the institutional context of the dual executive in France's semi-presidential system, as recently modified by the introduction of a five-year presidential term to run virtually simultaneously with that of parliament (Elgie 2003, pp. 95–128). There is no single model of presidential–prime-ministerial relations in the Fifth Republic (Portelli 1997). The most obvious distinction is between periods of cohabitation (when President and Prime Minister come from opposing political coalitions) and non-cohabitation (when both come from the same coalition), with the Prime Minister enjoying far greater autonomy during the former. However, this contrast is not wholly satisfactory, since important variations in the balance of executive power have been evident both during the three experiences of cohabitation (1986–1988, 1993–1995 and 1997–2002) and even more clearly across the many examples of non-cohabitation since 1958. For instance, under non-cohabitation executive arrangements, the President may dominate the Prime Minister, there may be a relatively harmonious division of labour between the two, or both may be in a quasi-permanent state of conflict.

A classic variant of presidential–prime-ministerial relations is where the President sets the main outlines of domestic policy and keeps for himself control of a so-called 'reserved domain' consisting of foreign affairs, defence, institutional reform and major issues concerning Europe, while the Prime Minister deals with the detail of domestic policy, budgetary matters and relations with parliament (Carcassone 1997). It is this model which has largely, though not wholly, characterized the relationship between Chirac and Raffarin.

The dominant foreign policy issue in the first half of the second Chirac presidential term was the Iraq conflict. The fundamental strategic question concerned the French position on military intervention, while the particular point of diplomatic controversy centred on the stance to be taken by France on a possible second resolution at the United Nations Security Council at the end of 2002 (Styan 2004). United States criticism of the French position in early 2003 served to increase Chirac's popularity with the French electorate, while the later policy of supporting a central role for the United Nations in Iraq's post-war reconstruction could be presented to domestic public opinion as both a principled and pragmatically responsible stance.

French policy on Iraq was formulated by the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dominique de Villepin, assisted by a small coterie of advisers. Raffarin was *not* part of the circle of key policymakers on the Iraq issue. Consequently, neither the government in general nor Raffarin in particular benefited significantly from the huge cross-party and popular support accorded the President on the Iraq issue in 2002–2003, which in the short term at least gave Chirac an opportunity to project a Gaullian

image as a unifying head of state. In April 2003, against the backcloth of the US-led invasion of Iraq, Chirac had an opinion poll confidence rating of plus 23 percent (60 percent positive / 37 percent negative), by far his best score during the first two years of his second presidential term (TNS Sofres 2004).

In the institutional policy arena the division of responsibility between President and Prime Minister has been more blurred. In 2003–2004, as part of his function as defender of the Republic, Chirac played a leading role in supporting the introduction of legislation banning the wearing of religious symbols in schools—the so-called ‘Islamic veil’ issue which provoked significant controversy both within France and abroad. It was Chirac who had established the commission on *la laïcité*, whose broad-ranging report under the chairmanship of Bernard Stasi was brutally condensed into the new legislation (Gemie 2004). In contrast to this presidential interventionism, however, what was heralded as one of the major institutional reforms of Chirac’s second presidential term—the decentralization of power to the regions and localities—was clearly a prime-ministerial initiative, with the President even distancing himself from Raffarin’s proposals in this area (Boeuf 2003). In addition, the President did not initiate the holding of a referendum in Corsica in the summer of 2003, but accepted the proposal from the Minister of the Interior (Sarkozy) in what was to prove the latest unsuccessful attempt by Paris to resolve the long-standing political problems of the island.

Since it is neither a wholly foreign nor totally domestic policy area, France’s relations with the EU exemplify the functioning of the dual executive division of labour. The President is in sole charge of major initiatives, such as the decision announced in the summer of 2004 that France would hold a referendum in 2005 on the adoption of the EU constitution. Moreover, while the controversy about France’s non-compliance with the 3 percent GDP threshold on budget deficits as laid down in the Eurozone growth and stability pact compelled Raffarin to provide a stout if unconvincing public defence of the French position, the policy itself would not have gone ahead without the prior approval of the President. In contrast, on more routine issues related to France’s membership of the EU, the Prime Minister and other government ministers are the main executive actors in policy formulation (Carcassone 1997, p. 71).

Within the historical framework of the functioning of the Fifth Republic executive dyarchy the largely subordinate role played by Raffarin does not of itself testify to a failure of prime-ministerial leadership. Since she or he does not benefit from the legitimacy conferred by direct popular election, the Prime Minister lacks a major structural resource available to the President since the 1962 constitutional amendment and, outside of periods of cohabitation, this tends to underpin a hierarchical relationship between the two. If conflict comes to a head, then it is the President who wins out, as illustrated by the disputes between Pompidou and Chaban-Delmas in 1972, Giscard d’Estaing and Chirac in 1976 and Mitterrand and Rocard in 1991, all of which ended in the resignation—voluntary in the case of Chirac, enforced in those of Chaban-Delmas and Rocard—of the Prime Minister.

Moreover, the formulation of policy in key sectors by individual ministers in the Raffarin government—for instance, Sarkozy on law and order, François Fillon on pensions and Douste-Blazy on health insurance—should not be regarded as evidence of prime-ministerial weakness either. Delegation of areas of policy responsibility to particular ministers is normal practice. In any case, like any Prime Minister in the Fifth Republic, Raffarin has been implicated in the domestic policy formulation of the government as a whole: first, politically through the imposition of decisions in areas of inter-ministerial disagreement and, second, symbolically as the face and voice of the government in the mediated public sphere.

Rather the leadership failure of Raffarin as head of government is exemplified in other ways. For instance the close involvement of the former Prime Minister and presidential confidant Juppé in the selection of ministers in 2002 and again in the major reshuffle of 2004 showed the lack of clout exercised by Raffarin in this important area of prime-ministerial responsibility. Even more significantly, Raffarin's leadership status has been undermined in several important respects by Sarkozy, even though the latter has occupied ministerial posts nominally lower down the governmental hierarchy, first as Minister of the Interior (2002–04) and then as Minister of Finance (from 2004). From day one of his appointment as Minister of the Interior Sarkozy conducted a media blitz in which he managed to portray himself as a highly effective minister in the fight against crime as part of his carefully cultivated image as a man of decisive action. The issue of *l'insécurité* had dominated the campaign prior to the first round of the 2002 presidential election as a moral panic concerning the breakdown of law and order in French society was whipped up among the public by a combination of news media stories and candidates' pronouncements. During the early months of the Raffarin premiership, therefore, the law-and-order issue dominated the political and legislative agendas, with Sarkozy leading the charge against criminal gangs, illegal immigrants and the activities of foreign prostitutes. The new government wanted to send the message that it was taking a tough line on crime and immigration, in the hope that this would defuse these issues and render them incapable of being exploited by the National Front for electoral purposes.

Sarkozy has pursued a political 'outreach' strategy in terms of his media projection and has also followed a 'semi-detached' challenger status with regard to both President and Prime Minister—establishing distance while eschewing where possible head-to-head conflict—as part of his strategy of becoming the UMP candidate for the 2007 presidential election (Mantoux 2003). Despite the electoral disaffection with the government and the UMP in 2003–2004, Sarkozy remained popular with large sections of the electorate. Building on his early successful ministerial self-publicity, in 2003–2004 Sarkozy continued to project an image of (relatively) youthful enthusiasm, unbounded energy and straight talking which provided a stark contrast to the image of the beleaguered Prime Minister, making Raffarin appear even weaker than might otherwise have been the case.

Faced with the challenge of Sarkozy, Raffarin has also failed to impose himself as leader of the *majorité*—the parties supporting the government in parliament. This was

always going to be a difficult task for Raffarin, given his roots outside the ranks of the Gaullist party, whose members form the largest component of the UMP. Moreover, it could be argued that Raffarin's problems in this respect have been compounded by the failure of the new party to fulfil the ambitions of its founders to provide the President and government with a parliamentary base centred on a united catch-all conservative party. The UMP has so far not managed to dominate, far less monopolize, the electoral terrain on the centre-right. In particular, it has not succeeded in incorporating or eliminating the electoral challenge from Bayrou's UDF, which has shown little inclination to play down its critical sniping role. The UDF is at the very least a convenient choice for moderate right-wing voters who wish to express their disenchantment with the government without voting for the left. In addition, the UMP has increasingly shown signs of its internal fragility. The party is divided along various cleavages: economic liberals versus 'one nation' conservatives; defenders of the central state against proponents of decentralization; supporters of the 'one and indivisible Republic' faced with advocates of a greater acceptance of multiculturalism and positive discrimination.

Nonetheless, the Prime Minister is himself implicated in his failure to impose himself as head of the *majorité*. He has been unable systematically to enforce his authority on a parliamentary party many of whose members would prefer to see Sarkozy as their natural leader. Emblematically, during the 2004 regional elections it was Sarkozy who was solicited by UMP candidates and militants to aid their cause after the disastrous first-round results, while Raffarin was compelled to adopt a low profile. The election of Sarkozy as head of the UMP in place of Juppé (now out of the political equation as a result of the judicial findings against him on the issue of corruption) will provide Sarkozy with a power base from which to pursue his strategy of 'semi-detachment', but henceforth in a more liberated fashion from outside the ranks of the government.

Sarkozy's presidentialist strategy has not just undermined Raffarin's leadership credentials as head of government and the *majorité*, but also to a significant extent sidelined him as a key player in the conflict at the heart of the executive.² In the summer of 2004, one of the leading journalists on *Le Monde* could talk of a power struggle between Chirac and Sarkozy, with the Prime Minister reduced to the status of an interested spectator (Gattegno 2004a). In short, in the battle over the presidential succession and the future of the right, Raffarin apparently has only a minor role in the drama.

Reforming from the Right

Since roughly the mid-1980s, there has been considerable agreement in principle across the mainstream political class in France about the need for structural reform of the state so as to alter its relationship with society and the economy. In part this elite consensus has been underpinned by the impact of the twin external challenges of globalization and Europeanization (Schmidt 2002), with the concomitant weakening of the previously unrivalled primacy of the nation-state as the site and source of

decision making (Meunier 2004). Internal pressures, such as demographic trends, have also reduced the viability of the French version of state welfare capitalism, which benefited from three decades of high economic growth, low unemployment and a huge increase in living standards after the end of the Second World War (Maclean 2002). Meanwhile, the apparent inability of political elites to respond to the heterodox and often conflicting demands of a disenchanted electorate have exposed faultlines in the body politic and civil society, the electoral repercussions of which were evident in the *coup de tonnerre* result of 21 April 2002. Placed alongside various social and economic indicators, the malfunctioning of political institutions and the widespread crisis of political authority have helped feed a post-millennium intellectual debate on the topic of France's possible decline (Baverez 2003; Duhamel 2003b; Les Dossiers du *Monde* 2004).

Taken together, these factors help to explain the Raffarin government's commitment to a sweeping programme of reforms. Since May 2002 reform measures have been either passed or flagged up in a variety of key policy areas, including law and order, pensions, decentralization, health insurance and industrial relations, among many others. Parliament has been submerged in the examination of proposed legislation, with parliamentarians complaining about the onerous pressures of the legislative timetable. The substantive details of these reform measures are not the concern of this article. Instead, this section is limited to a brief consideration of their overarching ideological coherence and status as right-wing policy initiatives.

It is questionable whether there is any clearly determined set of values to provide an ideological coherence to the Raffarin premiership's wave of reforms. Chirac has never been a politician of strong convictions; indeed his chameleon-like ability to adjust to the exigencies of circumstance has undoubtedly made an important contribution to his political longevity. Raffarin's statement of his political ideals, published in a book just after his appointment to the premiership, is based on two fundamental principles: 'modern humanism' and 'a new form of governance' (Raffarin 2002, p. 13). Even by the base standards of this political literary genre, Raffarin's expressed commitment to a mix of individual freedom and decentralist initiatives does not amount to a well-worked-out political philosophy.

It may be tempting to see in the Raffarin government's 2002–2004 reform agenda a 'Thatcherite' combination of strong state in law and order and immigration on the one hand—as evidenced in the Sarkozy and Perben legislative initiatives to increase police powers and reform the criminal justice system—and the systematic rolling back of the state in economic management and welfare provision on the other (Husson 2003). Yet such an evaluation would be too sweeping and simplistic. First, although the Raffarin government has followed a policy of preparing the way for the privatization of some companies where the state has an ownership stake, notably the gas and electricity supply industries and the telecommunications giant *France Télécom*, this has been accompanied by a commitment to state and EU intervention to support areas of activity, such as agriculture and the national rail system, which would be adversely affected by market liberalization and/or are considered politically sensitive. In the autumn of 2003 the

Raffarin government even came into conflict with the EU Commission over plans to bail out the ailing engineering company, Alstom, the constructor of the prestigious high-speed train and a public symbol of French industrial power.

Second, while the public sector has shrunk in France over recent years and Raffarin is committed to further reductions in the size of the civil service, the state still remains a significant source of employment. Moreover, by British standards there has been relatively little internal 'privatization' of the operations of the civil service, which has resisted the introduction of 'new public management' techniques. Third, the Raffarin government has not systematically sought 'to smash' the trade unions, as the second Thatcher government did in the mid-1980s. The pensions reform, skilfully negotiated by Fillon in the spring of 2003, even managed to secure the support of one of the major trade union confederations, the *Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail* (CFDT), following a process of negotiation in which consensus seeking was at least as evident as confrontation and the results of which were fiercely criticized by business organizations (Natali & Rhodes 2004). Moreover, the 35-hour working week, introduced by Jospin's minister for employment, Martine Aubry, was given the status of an *acquis social* by President Chirac in 2004. In the eyes of neoliberal critics, including the employers' organization Medef, the government has been far too timid about doing away with this impediment to entrepreneurial freedom (Bloch-London & Péliasse 2003). Finally, there is no equivalent of the degree of hostility to the institutions of the European Union which marked the rhetoric (if not always the actions) of the Thatcher government. In the forthcoming referendum on adoption of the European constitution, most if not all ministers in the French government will support a 'Yes' vote.

Nonetheless, the Raffarin government has acted as a government of the right, generally more favourable to the interests of capital than to those of labour. Against the background of significant ideological convergence across mainstream political elites in recent years, this may mean that not all of its policies can be significantly differentiated in terms of kind from those of the 'plural left' government of 1997–2002. On the issue of privatization, for example, the Jospin government stood accused in the eyes of its critics of having privatized more than its right-wing predecessors (Clift 2003, p. 176). Yet while the question of ownership of the means of production may no longer be a litmus test of left–right differentiation at governmental level, this does not mean that the distinction itself no longer has any validity. In labour market policy, for instance, the Raffarin government has been critical of the impact on the economy of the 35-hour week and substantially modified the impact of the Aubry legislation through the Fillon reform of January 2003. In taxation policy his government has introduced cuts in income tax rates which disproportionately benefit the upper echelons of society, while initially cutting back on long-term benefits for the unemployed. In the spring of 2004 it announced large reductions in the public sector's research budget, resulting in a campaign *Sauvons la recherche!* led by several of France's leading researchers. Finally, in a symbolic counter-Popular Front gesture it even proposed the abolition of one of France's 11 public holidays 'to help finance an assistance plan for the dependent elderly' and in the words of Raffarin 'to rehabilitate the value of work'.

Do the Raffarin government's policy reforms support the 'failed leadership' hypothesis? In many areas it is quite simply too early to judge whether the reforms will be substantively successful in achieving their stated objectives. However, with regard to the reform most closely associated with the Prime Minister personally—decentralization—it is noteworthy that this not only provoked significant opposition from the usual suspects, such as the education unions and the parliamentary opposition, but also came in for significant criticism from the Constitutional Council and from within the ranks of the parliamentary majority, including several UMP deputies and the speaker of the National Assembly, Jean-Louis Debré. It is worth noting that despite the huge parliamentary majority for his government, Raffarin has twice had recourse to the use of Article 49/3 of the constitution, whereby proposed legislation is considered as passed by the Assembly unless a successful motion of censure is adopted: first in 2003 to push through the reform of the electoral system for the regional elections and then in 2004 on his decentralization bill. Decentralization was intended by the Prime Minister to be 'the mother of reforms', to mark a decisive shift in the organization of the state. Instead, while some of the other reforms of the Raffarin government may well bear fruit, the Prime Minister's own watered-down reform—particularly with regard to the devolution of power to the regions—is unlikely to have anywhere near the impact originally desired by its progenitor. Indeed, for the next six years the left can hope to use their subnational power bases in the regions and localities as counter-balances to the hegemonic control of the right at the national level. In terms of process, substance and impact, therefore, Raffarin's decentralization reform has failed.

Raffarin's 'Communicative Premiership' Wilting in the Heat

One feature that initially marked the Raffarin premiership out from its predecessors of Chirac's first presidential term was its rhetorical emphasis on the importance of public communication. The inclusion of communication as an integral part of the functioning of recent French governments has been patchy to say the least and so the initiatives taken by Raffarin in this area, though limited in scope, were potentially quite significant. There are two analytically distinct aspects to Raffarin's approach to communication in government since 2002.

First there is the personal communicative style of the Prime Minister in the mediated public sphere. Raffarin has cultivated a 'common man' style of rhetoric, more down to earth than that of the didactic Jospin or the autocratic Juppé. For instance in media interviews he has played on his self-generated reputation for engaging with citizens and for being open to contact with the public. This he sees as part of his belief in the virtues of 'humanism' and 'community' (*proximité*). As Raffarin himself wrote, 'The taste for communication is anchored in my innermost depths' ('Le goût de la communication est ancré au plus profond de moi-même') (Raffarin 2002, p. 82). His malapropisms have become part of his public persona, with one of his better-known failed rhetorical flourishes—'La route est droite, mais la pente

est forte’—even being used by a Socialist politician as the title of a critical book on the first year of the Raffarin premiership (Lienemann 2003).

Second was the attempt to integrate communication into the government’s mode of governance. The pursuit of this objective was not surprising, given the Prime Minister’s employment record in marketing and communications, for instance as director general of Bernard Krief Communication for much of the 1980s. During his first year as Prime Minister Raffarin went further than either of his two predecessors in trying to establish a ‘communicative premiership’. The Juppé experience had been characterized by a ‘chronic communication deficit’, whereas Jospin had used communication but only as a ‘bolt-on’ to the policymaking process (van Stavel 2003, p. 256). In contrast, in the early months of the Raffarin premiership there was a distinct sense of a government that placed a high value on communicating its initiatives as part of the ground for preparing public opinion to embrace—or at least accept—its reform agenda. A notable instance was the series of government-funded adverts taken out in newspapers in May 2003 to explain and promote the proposed pensions reform to voters.

As Raffarin’s communication adviser at Matignon until his resignation in April 2004, Dominique Ambiel was given a greater role than his counterparts under Juppé and Jospin. Ambiel had a media rather than an administrative background, which made him stand out among Raffarin’s key advisers. His role was to ensure that public communication was given appropriate consideration in the process of prime-ministerial decision making. Ambiel’s input should not be overstated: he did not have the insider power nor the public recognition of, say, Alistair Campbell in the Blair government in Britain. Nonetheless, in the context of Chirac’s presidential tenure, Ambiel’s role at Matignon marked a modest attempt to give more weight to mediated public communication as part of the functioning of government (governmental communication), building on the recognition already accorded the importance of communicative activities in France by political parties in elections (campaign communication) and by the President as head of state (symbolic communication).

Raffarin’s attempt to construct a communicative premiership, however, quickly ran into trouble. First, no amount of mediated communication could assuage widespread popular opposition to some governmental initiatives. The substantive thrust of the pensions reform, for instance, was not judged positively by important sections of the electorate who saw it as a measure that would reduce their welfare entitlements. At best, communication could only help limit the damage of what was essentially a policy that any government would have found difficult to sell to sceptical voters (Schludi 2003). Second, in the personal communication stakes Raffarin was constantly outgunned by the consummate communication professional, Sarkozy (see above).

Above all, however, in terms of public communication the Raffarin government ran into a brick wall in the summer of 2003 over its handling of the heatwave crisis. The unusually high temperatures were responsible for the premature death of about 15,000 French citizens, mainly elderly, from heat exhaustion and dehydration. While even the government’s sternest opponents accepted that the weather was outside its control, the

lack of preparedness on the part of the relevant public authorities and the inadequacy of the government's response to the mounting death toll were subject to fierce criticism (Abenheim 2003). The heatwave constituted an administrative and organizational disaster. Not only did it take place in August when ministries are in 'stand down' mode, but government ministers, including the Prime Minister himself, did not fully appreciate the scale of the problem sufficiently early in the crisis because of failures of internal bureaucratic communication.

As well as a management failure, the government's response to the heatwave was also a massive public relations debacle. Health-related crises constitute one of the most difficult tests of any government's public communication effectiveness, as demonstrated by the contaminated blood affair of the 1980s which so tarnished the premiership of the Socialist Laurent Fabius. However, a government's news management response to public concerns about health are not doomed to failure: in terms of its mediated communications, for example, the Jospin government dealt reasonably well with the issue of 'mad cow' disease (Almeida & Delporte 2003, pp. 292–26). In contrast, the Raffarin government's media management of the heatwave crisis was inept. In substantive terms ministers and officials frequently provided inadequate and inaccurate responses to journalists' questions; in symbolic terms the government got its signals woefully wrong. One of the iconic television images of the summer of 2003 was that of the Health Minister, Jean-François Mattei, appearing on the main evening TF1 news programme to talk about the crisis, dressed in a sports shirt and clearly speaking from his holiday location. The image conveyed was wholly inappropriate; the symbolism of the attire totally out of step with the gravity of the situation; the press and public reaction uniformly critical. The heatwave fiasco demonstrated the paradox that a government apparently wedded to a belief in the importance of public communication clearly lacked a comprehensive and flexible proactive and reactive news management strategy that could cope with the demands of a 24-hour rolling news media culture.

Raffarin's Failure as a Campaign Leader: The 2004 Electoral Backlash

The government's inept handling of the heatwave crisis badly affected Raffarin's popularity with the electorate. After the initial honeymoon period which lasted up to the end of 2002, Raffarin's popularity started to decline in early 2003 as public opinion shifted its priorities away from security issues and back to employment. During the spring and early summer the country was hit by a series of overlapping protest movements, as teachers, public-sector workers and performance artists (*les intermittents du spectacle*) among others took to the streets to defend their corporate interests, conditions of service and welfare entitlements (Jefferys 2003). Coming on top of this growing public-sector disaffection, the heatwave crisis put the Prime Minister firmly on the defensive as voter confidence in his premiership ebbed away. Between August and December 2003 opinion polls showed the share of the electorate expressing confidence in Raffarin plummeting from 45 to 29 percent, with

the proportion demonstrating a lack of confidence increasing from 52 to 69 percent (TNS Sofres 2004).

Against this background it was clear that the 2004 cantonal, regional and European elections would be extremely difficult for the government. These second-order contests were the main nationwide soundings of public opinion scheduled to take place between the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2002 and 2007 and were widely regarded, therefore, as a crucial test of the government's electoral popularity. The regional elections in particular were seen by opposition parties, the electorate, the media and—albeit reluctantly in some quarters—by ministers and their parliamentary supporters as a de facto nationwide referendum on the performance of the Raffarin government. Worryingly for the Prime Minister, opinion polls in the run-up to the regional contest recorded a high percentage of voters who saw the election as an opportunity to register a protest vote (*vote-sanction*) against the government.

Well in advance of the elections Raffarin had sought to make two important changes to the electoral system in an attempt to marginalize the disruptive impact of the National Front (and other 'minor' parties) by making it more difficult for the extreme right to translate its electoral score into political representation and thus disrupt the implantation of the UMP. The changes were designed to avoid a repeat of the 1998 situation when, as a result of the proportional system then in place, in four regions the right had controversially sought the support of the *Front National* in order to retain control of the regional council. Raffarin had originally proposed that only party lists that gained the support of at least 10 percent of the registered electorate should be allowed to stand in the second round. Every party with the exception of the UMP had opposed the introduction of this high threshold, which nonetheless was passed in parliament because of the UMP's large majority. However, the Constitutional Council rejected this aspect of the legislation and instead new rules were adopted which imposed a the lower threshold of 10 percent of valid votes cast (Piastra 2003). In addition, under the new part-majoritarian, part-proportional system put in place for 2004 the party list that gained an absolute majority of votes in the first round or a relative majority in the second was given an automatic majority bonus of 25 percent of the seats.

While the new rules did work to the disadvantage of the National Front, the main beneficiary was not the pro-government UMP but the opposition left, especially the Socialist Party, which capitalized on the significant anti-government vote (Gattegno 2004b). Whereas previously the right had controlled 14 regional councils in metropolitan France out of a total of 21, in 2004 it lost control of all of them, with the sole exception of Alsace. This meant that the right relinquished power in traditionally safe regions, including Pays de la Loire, where the UMP list was headed by Fillon, and Poitou-Charentes, where the list headed by the former 'plural left' government minister Ségolène Royal won convincingly in what had previously been Raffarin's regional fiefdom.

The results of all three elections showed a high level of electoral disaffection from the government, with the UMP doing badly in terms of vote share when compared with its performance in the 2002 parliamentary election. By 2004 Raffarin's alleged

empathy with the concerns of the ordinary French citizen seemed to be a wasted asset. Yet while the results of these mid-term elections, particularly the regional, were interpreted as signalling a clear vote of no confidence in the policies of the government and Raffarin personally, Chirac refused to change Prime Minister in the government reshuffle that immediately followed the regional results, emphasizing instead the need for the government to place more emphasis on the social impact of its policies.

Conclusion

There are no wholly objective standards by which to evaluate the success or failure of a premiership, far less of political leadership. The fulfilment of manifesto commitments, the realization of favourable economic performance indicators such as growth rates and employment levels, electoral popularity, the acceptance of prime-ministerial authority by government ministers and parliamentary deputies, the plaudits of external bodies and independent experts, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD): these are some possible but not necessarily definitive criteria of assessment. Moreover, an evaluation of the Raffarin premiership is further complicated by the fact that (at the time of writing in the summer of 2004) it is still an ongoing exercise. In short, any assessment is to some extent subjective and of necessity provisional.

A sympathetic account of Raffarin's premiership to date would no doubt highlight the following. First, while the reverses of the 2004 mid-term elections were certainly severe, these were second-order contests where the national institutional power bases of the Fifth Republic were not at stake. The right retain control of these until the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for the spring of 2007. Moreover, no other significant elections are due to be held in the interim. This means that the government has the electoral timetable on its side, with a long period to elapse until the next nationwide consultations.

Second, the electoral scenario for 2007 is by no means wholly negative. While on the extreme right the *Front National* remains capable of picking up disaffected right-wing voters as well as those supportive of its hardline stances on issues of law and order, immigration and national identity, it has shown no sign of being able to go beyond the electoral score realized by Le Pen in the first round of the 2002 presidential election. Within the moderate right, Bayrou and the UDF have to build on a low score in 2002: only 6.8 percent for the UDF candidate in the first round of the presidential contest. Finally, the opposition parties remain divided. Despite its electoral victories in 2004 the Socialist Party, the keystone of the opposition, lacks an undisputed leadership figure and clear presidential candidate around whom voters might coalesce.

In any case, the pro-Raffarin camp might argue, the anti-government vote in 2004 is not a good pointer for what might happen in 2007. Not only is a significant section of the French electorate volatile in its voting behaviour, capable of switching its support between parties from one contest to another; in addition, short-term conjunctural factors such as the campaign agenda, level of voter turnout and the perceived leadership qualities of candidates are liable to influence the nature of the 2007

presidential election and its outcome. In the meantime, the Prime Minister and government can continue to rely on a massive parliamentary majority based on a single party. There is no possibility of the government being overturned by a successful motion of censure in the National Assembly. Moreover, unlike Jospin, Raffarin does not have to secure agreement by balancing the interests of different parties, either in government or among the parliamentary majority.

Finally, on the economic front some performance indicators are positive. In particular, in the first half of 2004 economic growth picked up significantly to give a projected rate of around 2.5 percent over the year as a whole. In comparison with the first half of 2003 performance had also improved substantially in other economic areas such as business investment, exports and household spending. This economic improvement will help the government address the public finance deficit and thus contribute to France meeting its European obligations with regard to the growth and stability pact criteria.

Yet whether the right can win in 2007 is a different issue from Raffarin's political leadership as Prime Minister. This article has argued that this has been marked by consummate failure. By the summer of 2004 the electoral credibility of the Prime Minister was substantially and perhaps irreparably damaged. Voter confidence in Raffarin was only 26 percent positive against a huge 71 percent negative, a minus gap of 45 percent. In contrast, Jospin's worse ever monthly result as Prime Minister (May 2002) was 40 positive and 57 negative, a minus gap of only 17 percent.

This massive lack of public confidence in Raffarin certainly needs to be placed in a wider historical context. First, it does not represent an all time low in the history of Prime Ministers in the Fifth Republic. That honour still rests with Edith Cresson with a minus gap of 54 percent (22 percent positive, 76 percent negative) in April 1992. Second, Raffarin has still not quite emulated the worst negative score of Juppé, who achieved a minus gap of 52 percent (23 percent positive, 75 percent negative) in November 1996. Finally, it should be remembered that Prime Ministers can survive for a long period with large deficits in the levels of public confidence expressed in them, as demonstrated by Raymond Barre in the latter part of the Valéry Giscard d'Estaing presidency, when the Prime Minister retained the support of the President for almost five years until the latter's electoral defeat. Nonetheless, for a head of government whose image was to a large extent based on his capacity for being in touch with the ordinary voter (which was not a claim ever made by or with reference to Barre), Raffarin's opinion poll ratings in the summer of 2004 were quite simply disastrous.

In addition, several economic indicators remain troublesome. In the spring of 2004 unemployment remained high at just under 10 percent, with youth unemployment (15–24 age group) over twice this level. Media coverage of the transfer of jobs to outside of France (*délocalisation*) constantly serves to highlight the employment issue in the public mind. Moreover, the government's struggle to constrain public expenditure within the limits of the Eurozone stability pact makes Chirac's 2002 electoral commitment to tax cuts difficult if not impossible to deliver. Finally, the French economy is open to the vagaries of the global economy, which may slow down in the near future in the wake of oil price hikes.

It is true that several of these economic indicators are subject to the vagaries of the performance of the interdependent global economy and as such it is difficult to talk of failed leadership at the national level. Where a Prime Minister can be reasonably expected to make a difference, however, is in the management of public expectations. In this regard the political question is not just to reform the role of the state, but to persuade voters of the inevitability and even desirability of such a course of action. Again, to be fair to Raffarin, this is an enormously difficult task. French voters have so far shown no particular willingness to accept changes in the role of the state which are regarded as reducing their rights as citizens or entitlements as service users. In the 2002 presidential election, for instance, the French did not vote in large numbers for those candidates such as Alain Madelin who explicitly advocated a leaner state. Moreover, there is strong opinion poll evidence that many French citizens still look to the state—rather than the individual, the local community, the voluntary sector or the market—for solutions to their socioeconomic problems. Nonetheless, as the political debate continues inside and outside of government regarding both the direction and the pace of state reform, it is reasonable to suggest that Raffarin has made little headway in the important arenas of transmitting a coherent message and managing public expectations. As the government prepares to tackle the difficult issues of health insurance and education reform, Raffarin now has little authority or credibility in government, among the parliamentary party or with the electorate. His tenure in the prime-ministerial office is in the hands of a President who may choose to continue with Raffarin until nearer 2007, but only so that he can act as a focus for electoral discontent and thus divert criticism away from the President himself.

Notes

- [1] 'Je suis un premier ministre désintéressé.' The comment was made during a television interview on the M6 programme *Zone interdite* in September 2003 (*Le Monde*, 23 September 2003).
- [2] Chirac has tried to stamp his authority in his relations with Sarkozy, remarking in a television interview on 14 July 2004 with reference to a disagreement with the Minister of Finance over the defence budget, 'I decide and he implements the decision' ('Je décide et il exécute'). The reality is, to say the least, more complex.

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