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The Changing French Political System: Introduction

ROBERT ELGIE

France is undergoing a period of social, political and economic change. Entrenched patterns of behaviour are being threatened by alternative forms of political action. Traditional cleavages are being undermined by social and ideological uncertainties. Intellectual paradigms are being replaced by new and more flexible perspectives. In short, like so many of its West European counterparts, France, if not in crisis, is certainly experiencing a profound transformation in the organisation and understanding of its political life.[1]

The aim of this volume is to chart some of the most significant changes in contemporary French politics and the study of it. Each contribution focuses on developments that have occurred in more or less specific aspects of the political system, including party politics, political institutions and the policy-making process generally. Together, these essays clearly illustrate both the breadth and the rates of change in various aspects of the political system. They indicate the variety of political situations that have manifested themselves in recent times. They also demonstrate the utility of new intellectual perspectives as a way of making sense of such change.

By way of introduction, the aim of this essay is to put the theme of change in context. It does so, first, by examining *change in French politics*, outlining the broad areas in which change has taken place and, in so doing, setting the scene for the contributions which follow; second, by considering *change and French politics*, suggesting that change is an ongoing process which has not simply resulted in the transition from one distinct model of politics to another; and, third, by reflecting on *French politics and change*, noting that the process of change raises new and fundamental questions as to the nature of the political process, while at the same time it leaves old and equally fundamental questions still needing to be addressed.

CHANGE IN FRENCH POLITICS

Identifying the areas of change in French politics is a task at which Sisyphus himself might have balked. After all, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that at least one of the most oft-cited sources of change, Europeanisation, has to a greater or lesser extent affected almost every aspect of the political process. Nevertheless, it is useful to illustrate the variety of change in French politics under three separate headings: political representation, political institutions and politics and policy making. Under each heading there have been several notable developments in recent years.

Political Representation

There have been changes in the context of political representation. Most notably, the system has undergone a period of party political change. Here, there have been important developments in the relationships within and between the more established parties in the system. These developments have affected the parties of the left, the mainstream right and the extreme right equally. At the same time, there have also been developments at the limits of the party system and, indeed, beyond. Most notably, established parties have been challenged by new expressions of political mobilisation.

The main development in the relationship between the various parties on the left has been the constitution of the so-called 'plural' majority government, which since 1997 has enjoyed a slender but comfortable parliamentary majority. The 'plural' majority comprises the Socialist Party (PS) as the dominant partner, the Communist Party, the Greens, the small PS-offshoot Mouvement des Citoyens (MDC) party, and the socialists' traditional allies, the equally small Left-Radical Party. The links between the parties remain loose. Indeed, there were competing left-wing party lists at the 1999 European election and such competition only causes difficulties for the government's political managers.

At the same time, the parties have also been united by the fact that, as a government, as a legislative majority and, conceivably, as a presidential majority in a few years time, their fates are intertwined. At present, each element of the 'plural' majority has an incentive to work together.

Of course, the new-found relationship *between* the parties of the left is itself simply a reflection of one of the most important developments *within* those parties in recent years, namely the rather unexpected outbreak of political realism. In particular, the leadership of the Communist Party, although not necessarily the rank-and-file members or even key elements of the parliamentary party, has decided, for the time being at least, that there is

political capital to be gained from working with the socialists in government. As such, the party has finally put behind it the rather unhappy experience of the 1981–84 government.

At the same time, the Greens have taken a similar decision. The politically disastrous *ni gauche-ni droite* strategy of the 1980s and early 1990s has been abandoned. While it is certainly the case that the Greens remain a potentially volatile partner – for many activists power is simply distasteful – it is also the case that in recent times the party has been willing to try to shape policy within the confines of the governmental system.

Finally, not the least important development on the left concerns the PS itself. The party has moved into the post-Mitterrand era. Indeed, it has done so rather more quickly than some might have predicted. True, the former president still has his apologists – Jack Lang and Roland Dumas are perhaps the most noteworthy – yet the key change is that Mitterrand and his governments are no longer the party's main reference points. This has allowed the PS to look forward, rather than back, and to plan for the future, rather than constantly being obliged to apologise for past mistakes, whether perceived or real.

On the right, the situation is difficult. Within the Gaullist Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) the divisions caused by the 1995 presidential election have yet to heal. The President, Jacques Chirac, has still fully to forgive his main opponent, Édouard Balladur, and the others who opposed him at that time. Indeed, only recently have key Balladur supporters, such as Nicolas Sarkozy, been allowed back into the presidential fold.[2] Moreover, the trauma provoked by the President's suicidal dissolution of the National Assembly in 1997 merely increased the party's problems. Most notably, it ruined the standing of the President's main supporter, former Prime Minister Alain Juppé, and fuelled the ambitions of one of the main likely candidates for the 2002 presidential election, Philippe Séguin. To add insult to injury, the party has lost, temporarily or otherwise, one of its old faithfuls, Charles Pasqua, who opposes what he considers to be the party's pro-European stance. In short, the Gaullist Party, which was once so monolithic and which demonstrated a distinct cult of personality, is now a federation of opposing fiefdoms over which Chirac has only limited control.

Even that degree of unity, though, is more than is enjoyed by the RPR's main rivals. In 1978, the parties of the non-Gaullist right were brought together under the banner of the Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF). The UDF, previously a confederation of separate parties rather than a party in itself, was never much more than a flag of convenience. However, it did allow Christian democrats, liberals, radicals and sundry *groupuscules*

not only to manage their basic ideological divisions but also to make the best of their political support.

Following the 1998 regional elections, however, the tensions between the various parties became uncontrollable. In several regions, elements of the UDF agreed to ally, either explicitly or implicitly, with the Front National in order to secure the presidency of the council. This strategy, though, was vehemently opposed by other elements within the movement, mainly the centrist Force Démocrate (FD) party. The result was a split which left the neo-liberal, Démocratie Libérale (DL) party clearly separate from a reconstituted FD-dominated UDF and the non-Gaullist right as a whole much weaker than before.

As if this situation was not bad enough, the divisions within the Gaullist and non-Gaullist right are matched by the problems between them. Over the years there have been many calls for a single right-wing party, but personal and institutional rivalries have always drowned them out. In 1998 another attempt was made to increase the degree of co-operation between the various interests concerned. The rather inappropriately named Alliance was a loose organisation which was designed to bring together the RPR, UDF and DL with a view to co-ordinating the parliamentary and electoral strategies of the right. It is, however, moribund. There has been increased co-operation between the RPR and DL, but this has merely alienated the UDF. At bottom, the Alliance was, and remains, nothing more than the sum of its divided and somewhat demoralised parts.

The third component of the party system to have undergone change is the extreme-right Front National (FN). Since the early 1980s the FN has established itself as a considerable force in the political system. Its influence has been manifested not so much in the institutional context, although it does control a small number of municipal councils and holds the balance of power in several regions, but more in both its ability to shape the political agenda, notably concerning immigration policy, and, as noted above, its capacity to cause trouble for its political opponents. Recently, though, the FN too has been undergoing a period of crisis. The long-standing antagonisms between its 'historic' leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and his main rival, Bruno Mégret, have come out into the open. Indeed, the party has split between the *lepéniste* Front National pour l'Unité Française (FNUF) and the *mégretiste* Front National-Mouvement National (FN-MN). Both organisations claim to represent the true FN. Both are currently fighting in the courts over the party's finances, the party logo and so forth.

The main difference between them is that the former adopts the *tous pourris* attitude towards the other parties in the system, whereas the latter is

more accommodating, seeing the transformation and subsequent success of the Italian Alleanza Nazionale party as a model to be followed. As a whole, the extreme right aspires to winning the votes of the 20–25 per cent of the population who, when polled, say that they 'share the ideas' of the FN.[3]

There is, however, scarcely room for both the FNUF and the FN-MN in the same policy space and there is even less likelihood that the two main protagonists will bury the metaphorical hatchet except in each other's back. Whatever the outcome of this situation, be it two extreme right-wing parties which collectively are able to increase the support for their ideas within the population as a whole, or be it a weakened movement which is punished by the electorate for its internal divisions, the position of the extreme right in the system has clearly entered a new phase.

At the same time as there have been changes both within and between the established parties in the system, so significant sections of the public are also more and more willing to bypass these organisations altogether in order to promote their aims. With regard to issues as diverse as unemployment policy, school reforms, gay rights, the hunting season, sub-national identities, farming expenditure cuts and a host of other concerns, groups are now organising themselves in ways which increasingly challenge the mainstream expressions of both party and traditional pressure group politics. These new organisations take many different forms. Some operate in traditional policy areas but are little more than quasi-spontaneous *coordinations* over which established interest group organisations have little control. The damage recently caused to the Environment Minister's office by 'rogue' farmers is one example. Others are now somewhat more institutionalised, but are concerned with policy issues that have only come upon the scene more recently. One such group which has managed to maintain a certain media profile is Act Up, the AIDS organisation.

Other groups still have combined traditional pressure group-lobbying with electoral politics. Here, the most notable example is the hunting lobby, which elected representatives to regional councils in 1998 and which won more than 5 per cent at the 1999 European election in the form of the Chasse Pêche Nature et Traditions list. To date, this lobby has been extremely successful in its campaign against the implementation in France of the European directive to shorten the hunting season and at times it has made life extremely uncomfortable for the Green Environment Minister, Dominique Voynet.

Together, these groups threaten the authority of received wisdom, routine procedures and established organisations. In some cases, they can force governments to address their issues in the space of a few weeks of

concerted activity. The budgetary success of the protests by anti-unemployment groups in January 1998 is notable in this regard. Alternatively, they can place issues on the agenda which might otherwise be ignored. The action by *sans-papiers* groups is a case in point. Certainly, they all know how to gain the attention of the media and use modern communication techniques. In these ways, such groups certainly provide complementary avenues of political expression, if not alternative forms of mobilisation for those people who feel inadequately represented by traditional political forces.

Political Institutions

Just as there have been changes in the context of representation, so there have also been changes in the organisation of political institutions. Most notably, there has been an increase in institutional pluralism, meaning competition between rival institutional interests. In this context, it is useful to signal the effects of 'cohabitation', the increasing influence of the law in the political process and the changing relationship between central and sub-central government.

Since 1986, 'cohabitation', or the situation where a president from one party coexists with a prime minister from an opposed party, has become a regular feature of French political life. The first two periods (1986–88 and 1993–95) were brought about by mid-term legislative elections which returned a majority hostile to the President. The third (from 1997) was brought about by the President himself, following the premature dissolution of the National Assembly. The effect of 'cohabitation' on the functioning of the institutional system is seen in two ways.

First, during the period of 'cohabitation' itself there is a reorientation of the policy-making process within the executive. In domestic policy matters the president remains a nuisance as far as the government is concerned, but little more. True, in foreign affairs, the EU and defence policy the president is still a privileged actor. However, evidence from the first three periods of 'cohabitation' suggests that presidents can no longer command a monopoly of initiative in these areas either. Instead, during 'cohabitation' presidents tread water, trying best to organise their re-election campaign by making life difficult for political enemies and by building and rebuilding links between political friends.

Second, and more fundamentally, 'cohabitation' has gnawed away at the institutional authority of the presidency *per se*.[4] Of course, presidential infallibility was always a myth, but it was one which had some force especially during the de Gaulle incumbency. 'Cohabitation', though, has

thrown into stark relief the fact that the President is, first and foremost, a party political actor like any other. As a result, the President can still sound regal and claim to be the representative of all the French people, but the president-king is now shown to be well and truly bare. All told, the leadership capacity of the chief executive is increasingly restricted not just during periods of 'cohabitation' itself, but outside them as well.

A further development has also limited the power of political leaders, namely the entrenchment of the *État de droit*. The influence of the Constitutional Council is now a well-documented phenomenon. Governmental legislation is not only routinely examined by the Council after it has been passed by the legislature, governments also try to anticipate the Council's decisions before bills are presented to the legislature in the first place.[5] There has, thus, been a constitutionalisation of the policy-making process.

In addition, the Council of State remains a significant institution whose decisions can have profound political consequences. It might be remembered that it was the Council of State which struck down the 1998 election of the president of the Rhône-Alpes regional council. It was when the council set about electing a new president that the divisions between the UDF, on the one hand, and DL and the RPR, on the other, became intolerable. Over and above these institutions and other established actors, notably the Court of Cassation and the Court of Accounts (*Cour des Comptes*), new judicial actors are emerging on the scene.

A notable example, here, is the European Court of Justice. The threat of sanction by the Court is now a powerful force to which domestic actors must respond. Equally, the changing role of local government has meant that regional courts have become significant players in their own right. These courts now have the power to decide whether or not local councils have misused public funds. As such, although their decisions can be appealed, they have become a key player in the process of local governance.

Finally, despite its many and serious shortcomings, the Court of Justice of the Republic (CJR) is also worth mentioning in this regard. The CJR was established in 1993 as the body which judges ministers who are accused of having committed an offence during their official duties. The first, and to date only, sitting of the Court was in February 1999. Here, a former prime minister, Laurent Fabius, and two former ministers, Edmond Hervé and Georgina Dufoix, were tried for their role in the blood contamination scandal, whereby blood transfusions were contaminated with the HIV virus in the mid-1980s. In many respects, the trial was a scandal in itself. And yet, the fact that it happened at all is significant. It was a clear sign that ministers

are not above the law and that there are ways, however imperfect, of holding them accountable. (Indeed, one former minister, Edmond Hervé, was found guilty). As such, it showed, along with many other examples, that the law is increasingly encroaching on the political realm, that it is constraining the freedom of action that political leaders enjoy.

Another example of institutional pluralism worth noting concerns centre-periphery relations. There has been tremendous change in this area over the last 20 years. Indeed, it would scarcely be misleading to suggest that there is now a system of multi-level governance in France. According to this line of thought, it is misconceived to examine policy making in this area simply in terms of the relations between the central state and local administrative bodies. Instead, it is necessary to factor in the influence of the EU in shaping the regional policy-making space, the role of private actors in the creation of local policy networks and the horizontal links between local authorities themselves (*intercommunalité*). There is no doubt that old problems remain, albeit sometimes in new forms. For example, there is still a propensity towards *suradministration*, or multiple layers of administrative responsibilities, which has merely been exacerbated by the reforms of the last 20 years.[6] However, new opportunities have also been created. So, Le Galès, for one, has stressed the increasing importance of urban governance.[7]

In this context, a new political cleavage has emerged. On the one hand, there are those, such as Jean-Pierre Chevènement, whose focus is a traditional one – the state, the department and the commune. On the other, there are those, such as Dominique Voynet, who place the emphasis on new arenas of influence – Europe, the region and *intercommunalité*. This cleavage is important not only because it will shape the future of centre–periphery relations, but also because it is a reflection of wider ideological concerns, namely the relationship between the nation-state and Europe, the role of the state as either a provider of services or the regulator of those who provide those services on its behalf and, finally, the status of the individual as either a subject of the state's authority or a citizen with the capacity to shape the decisions which affect her.

Policy Change

There is policy change. Political leaders have faced an evolving policy-making environment in which established policy routines have been undermined and traditional solutions have been shown to be deficient. The result is that some problems, such as the problem of long-term unemployment, inner-city violence and drugs, seem impossible to resolve,

whereas others, such as monetary and interest rate policy, seem too remote to shape. And yet, the public still demands results, while candidates – presidential, parliamentary and local – continue to create the expectation that these demands will be met.

Against this background, it is useful to identify three areas of policy change. The first concerns a reappraisal of the traditional role of the state. Political leaders have shown a willingness to disengage the state from certain policy domains. The second, somewhat paradoxically, relates to a reaffirmation of the traditional role of the state. Just as political leaders have been willing to disengage the state, so they have also shown a keenness to increase the level of state intervention in specific policy areas if the situation is right. The third concerns the Europeanisation of the policy process. The impact of Europe is now demonstrated in a series of domains.

Over the last decade or so, there has been a reappraisal of the traditional parameters of policy making. For example, there has been a shift from the state as both decider and overseer to the state as a simple parameter-setter. Decision-makers have been willing to shift the responsibility for the supervision of policy in certain domains from the state to independent administrative authorities. Here, the most high-profile example is the Higher Council of Broadcasting (Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel – CSA). The CSA has the sometimes unenviable task of policing the day-to-day operation of the broadcasting sector. Of course, the state is still closely linked to the process of policy making in this domain. After all, it sets the boundaries of policy within which the CSA operates, not to mention the fact that there is still a considerable number of public-sector broadcasting institutions. However, the CSA is now a key player in its own right with the power to shape the French broadcasting sector over and above the demands of state actors.

In addition to this particular change in the role of the state, there has also been a shift from the state to the market *tout court*. The most significant change concerns the privatisation of public sector companies. Here, what is perhaps most significant is not so much the zeal with which the 1986–88 and 1993–97 right-wing governments sold off the state's assets, but the extent to which the left-wing 'plural' majority government has done the same. Indeed, in the space of less than two years in office the government had authorised the sale of shares in France Télécom, Aerospatiale, Air France and Thomson to name but a few! In most cases, but not Aerospatiale, the state retained more than a 50 per cent stake of the shareholding.

However, that a government which included communist representation should even contemplate, never mind approve, such a policy and in such a

wide variety of cases is worthy of note. Indeed, the contrast with the policy of the 1981 administration could hardly be more striking. Thus, we see the boundaries of state intervention being redefined in a series of key industrial and cultural domains.

At the same time, we have also seen a reaffirmation of the state's traditional role. In this context, it is clear that policy makers still believe that the state can play a social function, meaning that its resources should be mobilised in order to address pressing social issues. This belief, like the previous one, is shared by both sides of the political divide, at least in general terms. For example, in 1993 the right-wing Balladur government declared a moratorium on the closure of public-sector organisations in local areas. Of course, there were good political and electoral reasons at the time for so doing, but it was also a signal that the French right (or at least some elements of it) is not as dogmatic in its liberalism as some of its counterparts elsewhere. The state still enjoys a privileged role for at least some of the main policy-makers who belong to this camp.

That said, the reaffirmation of state intervention corresponds mainly to the arrival of the left in government in 1997. In this regard, one of the government's first measures was to announce a plan to create 350,000 new state-sector jobs mainly for young unemployed people. For the most part, these people would carry out only basic functions, such as security guards in schools, but they would at least have a job and they would be in public sector employment. This was a clear indication that the state was still seen as a vehicle by which social and economic problems could be addressed.

A further example concerns the desire to introduce a 35-hour working week. This reform was significant not so much in its practical impact – the success of the measure remains very limited – but because the government was willing to go ahead with the scheme without the support of the main employers' confederation. This demonstrated that decision-makers were ready to impose a state-centred policy, even if one of the main social groups affected by it disapproved.

Finally, an equally significant example concerns the decision to make law and order the government's second most important policy priority after the economy.[8] The left has apparently been converted to the idea, which was once the exclusive property of the right, that the state's resources should be mobilised in a clear and unequivocal fashion in order to address the law and order issue.

Over and above the changing parameters of purely domestic policy making the policy process has increasingly adopted a European dimension as well.[9] The impact of the European Union (EU) can be illustrated very

neatly in the context of both budgetary and monetary policy. So, for example, in terms of the former the convergence criteria for Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) have clearly influenced budgetary policy since 1994. Since this time, budgetary decisions have been shaped by the desire to meet the 3 per cent budget deficit criterion. Paradoxically, this constraint has actually strengthened the hand of senior decision-makers – the Budget and Finance Ministers, the Prime Minister and, outside 'cohabitation', the President – in their negotiations with spending ministers, because the former could claim that they were responding to an overriding imperative and the latter simply had no choice but to reduce their expenditure demands. At the same time, of course, the EU still imposed a general constraint on the government and set strict parameters within which decision makers had to operate.

In terms of monetary policy the need to establish an independent Bank of France and then the decision to take part in EMU meant that the French government was obliged to lose the power to control interest rate policy. The fact that governments had manipulated this policy tool to suit their own ends for hundreds of years merely underlines the significance of this change.[10] In the future, the French may have to live with high interest rates even if domestic demand is low.

That said, whatever the impact of the EU, and it has been considerable, it would be wrong to suggest that the French government is now powerless both in these domains and others. In economic policy, for example, key decisions will still have to be made even within the confines of EMU. These decisions will concern budgetary priorities and the most appropriate level of the budget deficit up to the 3 per cent ceiling. Similarly, in monetary policy the government will almost certainly try to act in collaboration with its European partners in order to put pressure, albeit indirectly, on the European Central Bank (ECB) with regard to interest rate cuts. The French have long championed the idea of an 'economic government' which would act as a political counterweight to the ECB and the so-called Euro-XI group of finance ministers may yet provide such a forum. Thus, there is no doubt that the policy process has been Europeanised and that the extent of EU influence will only increase in the foreseeable future. However, the French government does still retain at least a certain strategic decision-making capacity in this regard.

CHANGE AND FRENCH POLITICS

It is clear from the above that French politics has been experiencing a period of change. As such, one of the key academic tasks is to identify the various

areas of change and to account for them. This is the basic aim of most of the contributions to this volume. At the same time, though, it is also necessary to place the current period of change in context. It is necessary to examine not just the issue of change in French politics, but also the problem of change and French politics. How should we contextualise the current period of change? What is the significance of recent changes in terms of the French political system more broadly? Here, two key observations can be made: first, that France has experienced not just a discrete period of change, but change as an ongoing process; and, second, that the result of the recent period of change is not simply the move from one discrete type of political system to another, but a series of multi-speed, multi-level and multi-directional moves within an already confused and highly complex system.

The first point to note is that change is not simply a recent phenomenon. On the contrary, change, be it economic, social or political, should be viewed as an ongoing process. It is noticeable, for example, that in his illuminating study of crises in France, Michel Winock concludes that the key characteristic of the French system of government is its 'extreme *instability*'.[11] Indeed, in the period 1871–1968 Winock calculates that France experienced eight separate crises, or an average of one every 12 years. To the extent that crises usually either reflect or instigate a period of change, then these figures suggest that change is endemic to French political life.

Even then, it might be argued that this approach actually underestimates the turbulent nature of the French political system. This is because Winock defines a crisis as a period of 'major disturbances which place the republican system of government in danger'.[12] Change, though, is not simply confined to periods of such extreme stress. After all, Winock suggests, and quite correctly according to his definition, that the years from 1898 to 1934 correspond to a period of stability. And yet, this period encompasses the First World War which, over and above any upheaval during the conflict, was clearly associated with profound economic and social change in the years immediately thereafter. All in all, even leaving aside the period prior to 1871, evidence suggests that change is an ongoing feature of French political life.

The same point can be made with regard to the Fifth Republic itself. The early years of the regime coincided with profound institutional and political reform. The institutions of the Fifth Republic, combined with the direct election of the President after 1962, brought about a complete reorientation of the political system. There were new rules of the game which parties endeavoured to master. At the same time, there was the resolution of the Algerian question. This removed one of the most problematic of political

issues and allowed a transformation of the political debate. Thereafter, even though the basic contours of the Fifth Republic had been set in place, institutional and political change continued to occur. Highly familiar examples include the rise of the Gaullist Party, the establishment of the PS, the union and disunion of the left, the end of the Gaullist presidency, the federation of the non-Gaullist right and the alternation in power in 1981.

Furthermore, in addition to the institutional and political changes that occurred after 1958 there was social change too. In his study of French society, Mendras argues that there was, in effect, a second French revolution in the 1960s and 1970s.[13] He points out that the period 1944–65 was marked by economic growth, a rising population, the decline of the peasantry and rural life in general and the rise of the salariat. After 1965 the birth rate fell, immigration and unemployment rose, the Catholic Church modernised and there was an Americanisation of French cultural life. For Mendras, these changes, and others, coincided with a decline in the revolutionary tradition, the end of the clerical/anti-clerical division and an increasing focus on both economic and lifestyle issues, rather than broader social and political questions. All in all, while in Winock's terms there may only have been one threat to the republican system of government during this time (in 1968), it would be wrong, as before, to suggest that regime stability necessarily corresponds to social and political stability.

Against this background, we can perhaps better understand the implications of the current period of change. There is no doubt that change in this period demonstrates particular characteristics. As we have suggested, and as the subsequent contributions to the volume will confirm, the change is multi-speed. That is to say, the pace of change is greater in some areas (Europeanisation) than others (new public management). The change is multi-level. It affects not just political life at the centre, but also the sub-central and supranational level as well. The change is multi-directional. There are countervailing developments (the retreat of the state in some areas and the reaffirmation of the state in others).

At the same time, though, the current period of change should not be considered in isolation. The changes that have undoubtedly occurred during this period merely mingle in with a broader flow of change that predates this time. Indeed, there is nothing to suggest that previous periods of change in both the recent and more distant past were themselves anything other than multi-speed, multi-level and multi-directional in nature as well.

This is not to say, of course, that there are no continuities in the French political system. On the contrary, there may be deep-rooted cultural features which transcend epiphenomenal developments and, certainly, the nature of

political institutions is such that there can be regularities in the distribution of power resources which structure the behaviour of political actors over a not inconsiderable period of time. It is simply to say that it is necessary not just to identify and account for the contemporary manifestations of change, but also to contextualise these changes as well.

This is not the place to embark on a full-scale examination of 200 years of change in French politics. There is merely room to assert that the current period of change must be placed in the appropriate context if its significance is to be properly understood. And yet, this point is essential. After all, if we were to try to place the current period in context, then what may emerge is not so much the picture of a political process which has undergone a complete transformation in the last few years and which has induced a move from one type of political system to another, but one which is characterised by ongoing developments affecting an already diffuse and highly complex political process. So, for example, there is no doubt that 'cohabitation' has weakened the presidency, but there were always constraints on the president's powers, despite the political rhetoric and academic commentary which sometimes suggested the opposite. Similarly, at present there are elements of division and unity within both the left and the right, and yet to a greater or lesser degree there always have been. Likewise, certain policy problems may now seem impossible to resolve, but this was no less the case in the 1890s, 1930s, 1950s and no doubt other periods as well. Finally, it is undeniable that domestic decision-makers are now constrained by external forces, but was there ever a time when they were not? Thus, the current period is no doubt one of change in French politics. However, the developments associated with this period should not disguise the nature of change and its place in the French political system more generally.

FRENCH POLITICS AND CHANGE

By examining the recent period of change and by placing it in context, we can build up a broader picture of the French political process. At the same time, we also need to reflect, albeit briefly, on the nature of French politics and change. What questions are raised by the experience of change, both ongoing and current? More specifically, what is new about French politics in the light of recent developments and what remains pertinent about more established debates in this regard?

In the first place, it is clear that the current period of change raises important new questions and establishes new lines of cleavage. The most obvious example concerns Europe. It is still unlikely that there will be a

fundamental party political realignment between pro- and anti-European forces. For example, the *jacobin* left in the form of the Mouvement des Citoyens (MDC) has consistently rejected the overtures of the republican right represented by Charles Pasqua and his supporters.

That said, the European question continues both to divide parties internally and to hinder the process of alliance-building more generally. For example, Europe is one of the main sources of difference between the PS, on the one hand, and the communists, Greens and the MDC, on the other.[14] There is no doubt that the cohesion of the 'plural' majority is rendered more fragile by the conflicting reactions within the government to developments at this level.

Similarly, the European issue bedevils the right. Indeed, it was one of the main reasons why the pro-European UDF refused to unite behind a single right-wing list dominated by the once and perhaps future Eurosceptic RPR at the 1999 European election. In these ways, and many others, the European dimension has rendered party politics more unpredictable.

Further examples reflect the changing nature of society itself. The first concerns the so-called *pacte civil de solidarité* (PACS). This measure was designed to give legal protection to non-married couples. In particular, it would give such couples formal rights in areas such as tax policy and inheritance issues. However, the debate quickly centred on the question of whether it would amount to a form of surrogate marriage for homosexual couples. Formally, the left proposed the reform and the right opposed it. However, there were barely disguised divisions within both camps, particularly in the PS itself. These divisions reflected a basic cleavage between what might be called the 'traditionalists', those promoting the established family unit, and the 'progressives', those who were open to other forms of conjugal relationships. Needless to say, there was no risk of the PACS issue splitting the parties, but it was an example of the difficulties parties face in responding to changing social norms.

The second example concerns the *parité* issue. Both the right-wing president and the left-wing government supported a constitutional amendment designed to promote the representation of women in political life. However, they were opposed by the right in Senate, whose support was needed for the reform to be passed and which rejected the wording of the amendment that had been passed unanimously by the National Assembly.[15]

Again, this situation threw into stark relief the cleavage between those willing to reform the political system in line with social expectations and those who were opposed to the reform on the grounds that it was either anti-republican or that it was simply an unnecessary intrusion into the

established organisation of political life. In this case, the debate also illustrated the gap between the directly accountable and at least somewhat more socially sensitive National Assembly and the indirectly accountable and 'democratically anomalous' Senate.[16] All told, the likelihood is that as society changes further other issues of this nature will emerge causing additional problems for established political forces, both institutional and party political.

These examples aside, the current period of change also reaffirms more traditional questions about the nature of French politics. One such question concerns the pertinence of the left/right divide. The last special edition of *West European Politics* to be dedicated to France included an essay by Douglas Johnson about *les deux Frances*.[17] Drawing mainly on the work of André Siegfried, François Goguel, René Rémond and Maurice Duverger, Johnson suggested that, although the manifestation of the left/right division may have changed over time, a 'persistent, nagging and unsatisfactory notion that there are, in fact, *les deux Frances*' has persisted.[18] More than twenty years on, this point remains valid.

During this period, the meaning of what it is to be on the left or on the right has changed. Most notably, the left has reevaluated traditional values such as *laicité* and has certainly reexamined the balance between state and market. Still, though, there remains a basic division between the two camps such that they continue to make enemies of each other. Indeed, nothing more neatly illustrates this point than the position of the centrists.

In 1988, they were tempted to move over to the left and work with the socialists, but basic ideological differences, and not a small degree of political conniving, kept them apart.

In 1998, the centrists were again at loggerheads with their right-wing partners, but the likelihood that they will cross the divide and ally with the left is still only a remote possibility. Thus, despite divisions within the left and the right, there remain deep-seated loyalties which continue to structure political debate and which supervene on short-term political developments that superficially at least appear to threaten the basic contours of the left/right divide.

Another example concerns the old debate about French exceptionalism. There is no doubt that French politics is no longer what it was.[19] As a result, there are many writers who believe that French politics has lost its originality (*s'est banalisé*). According to this line of argument, the impact of globalisation, Europeanisation and domestic change means that French politics now manifests itself in the same ways as politics in other countries. At the same time, though, there are many other writers who suggest that,

despite the changes that the country has clearly undergone, France maintains important elements of specificity. For example, the state, it might be argued, is still stronger than its counterparts elsewhere. Equally, French society, some say, is still unable to govern itself.[20] It is still beset by special interests. It still lacks a flourishing civil society from which change, other than the state-directed variety, can spring. It is clear, therefore, that the current period of change has not ended this debate. There is no consensus either that France has become simply *un pays comme les autres*, or that it remains socially and politically unique. Instead, the developments of the last few years have simply provided new examples upon which proponents of both sides of the argument have seized in order to make their case.

In these ways, the current period of change raises new problems, both social and political, which are materially different to ones which were present in the past. Thus, political leaders are faced with new challenges and political scientists are encouraged to find new paradigms so as to explain these challenges. Equally, though, the changes that have occurred during this period fail to render obsolete some of the more established elements of the political process. Therefore, decision-makers still operate within a context in which long-standing aspects of the political system remain salient and academics should still continue to ask the basic questions about the fundamental nature of French political life.

THE CHANGING FRENCH POLITICAL SYSTEM

As noted at the outset, the aim of this volume is to chart some of the most significant changes in contemporary French politics and to make sense of them. To this end, the contributions are organised in three separate sections. The first concerns the politics of representation. Three contributions to this volume explicitly address this issue. Joseph Szarka examines the left and the rise of the plural majority; Paul Hainsworth puts the right in perspective, identifying the difficulties that have been faced by the Gaullists, the non-Gaullist right and the extreme right equally; while Andrew Appleton considers the rise of new social movements, suggesting that alternative forms of political participation have become established.

The second addresses challenges to the institutional politics. What is the constitutional basis of good government? This is the issue examined by Guy Carcassonne in his contribution. What is the relationship between law and politics? Vincent Wright tackles this question. What is the relationship between central and local authorities? This is the focus of Emmanuel Négrier's piece. Together, these essays explore the new boundaries of

institutional politics and their effect on the wider political game.

Third, three contributions focus on the policy-making process. The first, by Vivien Schmidt, is a wide-ranging survey of the changing relationship between the state and society in Fifth Republic France. The second, by Alistair Cole, considers the role of the public service more specifically. What is the proper role for the *service public* in the contemporary context of policy making? The third, by Steve Griggs, focuses on health policy and the emergence of a new policy network of hospital managers with the capacity to shape outcomes to suit their own ends.

Finally, by way of providing an overview of all of these areas – representation, institutions and policy making – Jill Lovecy considers whether the challenges that France is facing and the changes that it is undergoing mean that the country is now simply one among many, facing the same problems as any other developed system, or whether it still maintains its own particular forms of political uniqueness.

Together, these contributions explore the changing French political system and provide the foundations for future explorations of the politics of this most fascinating of countries.

NOTES

This manuscript was completed before Vincent Wright's untimely death in July 1999. As ever, Vincent supported the project from its inception and as late as March 1999 participated in a conference on the theme of 'The Changing French Political System' at the Maison Française in Oxford. Then, as always, he was a valued contributor, colleague and friend. This special edition of *West European Politics* is dedicated to his memory.

1. This journal has itself provided ample evidence of the extent of change in West European politics in the last few years. Examples can be found in the special editions on Austria, 'Politics in Austria. Still a Case of Consociationalism?', *WEP* 15/4 (Oct. 1992); Italy, 'Crisis and Transition in Italian Politics', *WEP* 20/1 (Jan. 1997); and Spain, 'Politics and Policy in Democratic Spain. No Longer Different?', *WEP* 21/4 (Oct. 1998).
2. Sarkozy was appointed as head of the party and leader of the RPR-DL list at the European election when in April 1999 Séguin unexpectedly stood down claiming that his election campaign was being undermined by both the president himself and other leading RPR figures.
3. See the article by Jérôme Jaffré in *Le Monde*, 24 Feb. 1999.
4. For an interesting account of the changing role of the presidency in French society, see Jean-Marie Donegani and Marc Sadoun, *La Ve République. Naissance et mort* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy 1998).
5. See John T.S. Keeler and Alec Stone, 'Judicial-political Confrontation in Mitterrand's France. The Emergence of the Constitutional Council as a Major Actor in the Policy-making Process', in George Ross, Stanley Hoffman and Sylvia Malzacher (eds.) *The Mitterrand Experiment. Continuity and Change in Modern France* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1987) pp.161–81.
6. I am grateful to Seán Loughlin for underlining this point to me.
7. Patrick Le Galès, 'Du gouvernement des villes à la gouvernance urbaine', *Revue Française*

de Science Politique 45 (1995) pp.57–95.

8. This was signalled in an interview with Lionel Jospin in *Le Monde*, 7 Jan. 1999.
9. A recent overview can be found in Alain Guyomarch, Howard Machin and Ella Ritchie (eds.) *France in the European Union* (London: Macmillan 1998).
10. A discussion of the relationship between the government and the Bank of France can be found in Robert Elgie and Helen Thompson, *The Politics of Central Banks* (London: Routledge 1998).
11. Michel Winock, *La fièvre hexagonale. Les grandes crises politiques 1871–1968* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy 1986) p.376. Emphasis in the original. All translations by the author.
12. Ibid. p.10.
13. Henri Mendras, *La seconde révolution française 1965–1984* (Paris: Gallimard 1994).
14. It might be remembered that one of the main reasons why the MDC split from the PS in the first place was because it opposed the party's pro-European policy.
15. The former left-wing justice minister and senator, Robert Badinter, was also opposed to the reform. Indeed, so was his wife, Elisabeth Badinter, herself a well-known public figure.
16. Lionel Jospin caused a stir when he said that the French Senate was an anomaly among democratic legislatures.
17. Douglas Johnson, 'The Two Frances: The Historical Debate', *West European Politics* 1/3 (Oct. 1978) pp.3–10.
18. Ibid. p.10.
19. See René Rémond, *La politique n'est plus ce qu'elle était* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy 1993).
20. This is thesis proposed by Stanley Hoffmann in 'Les Français sont-il gouvernables?', *Pouvoirs* 68 (1994) pp.7–14.