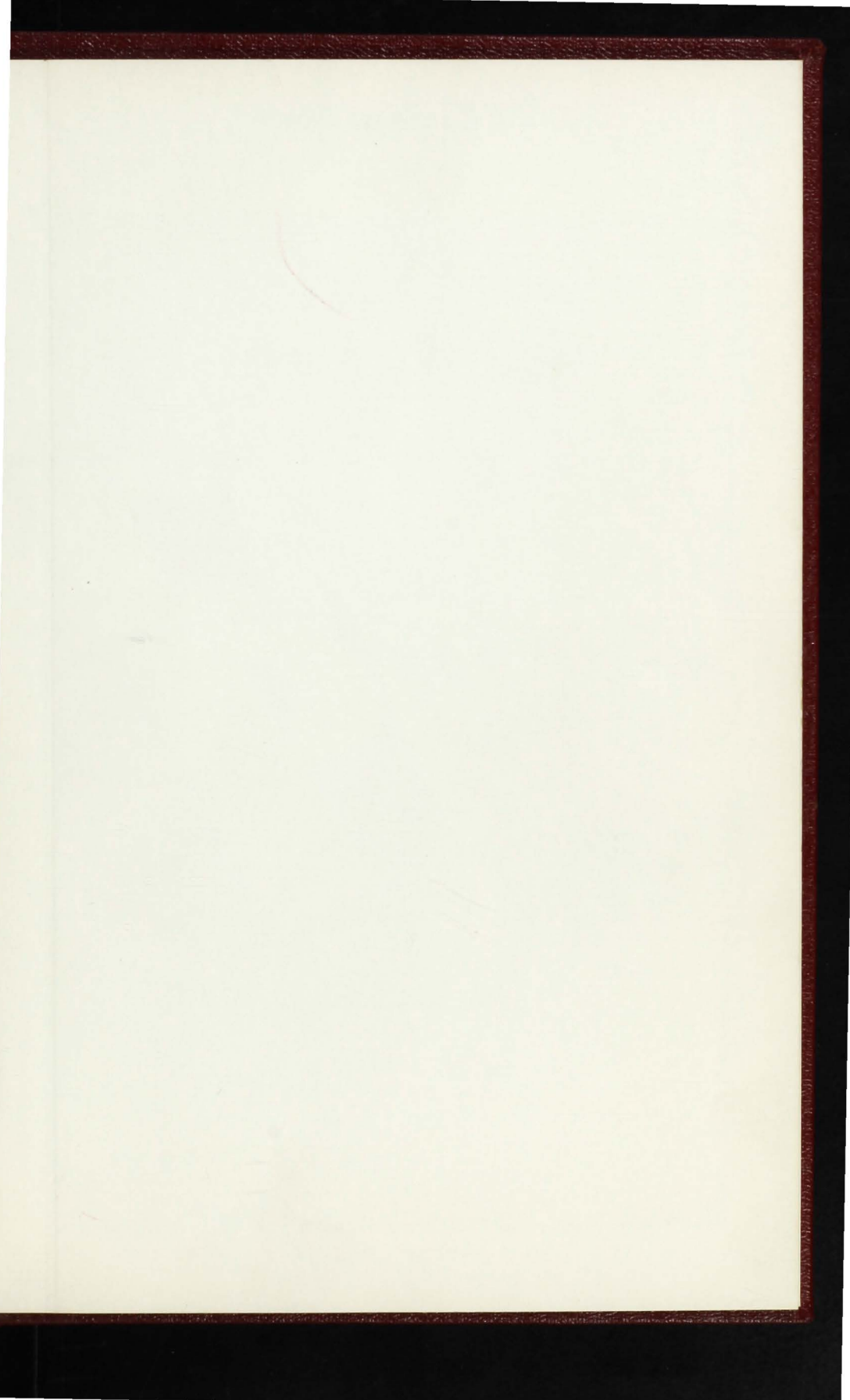


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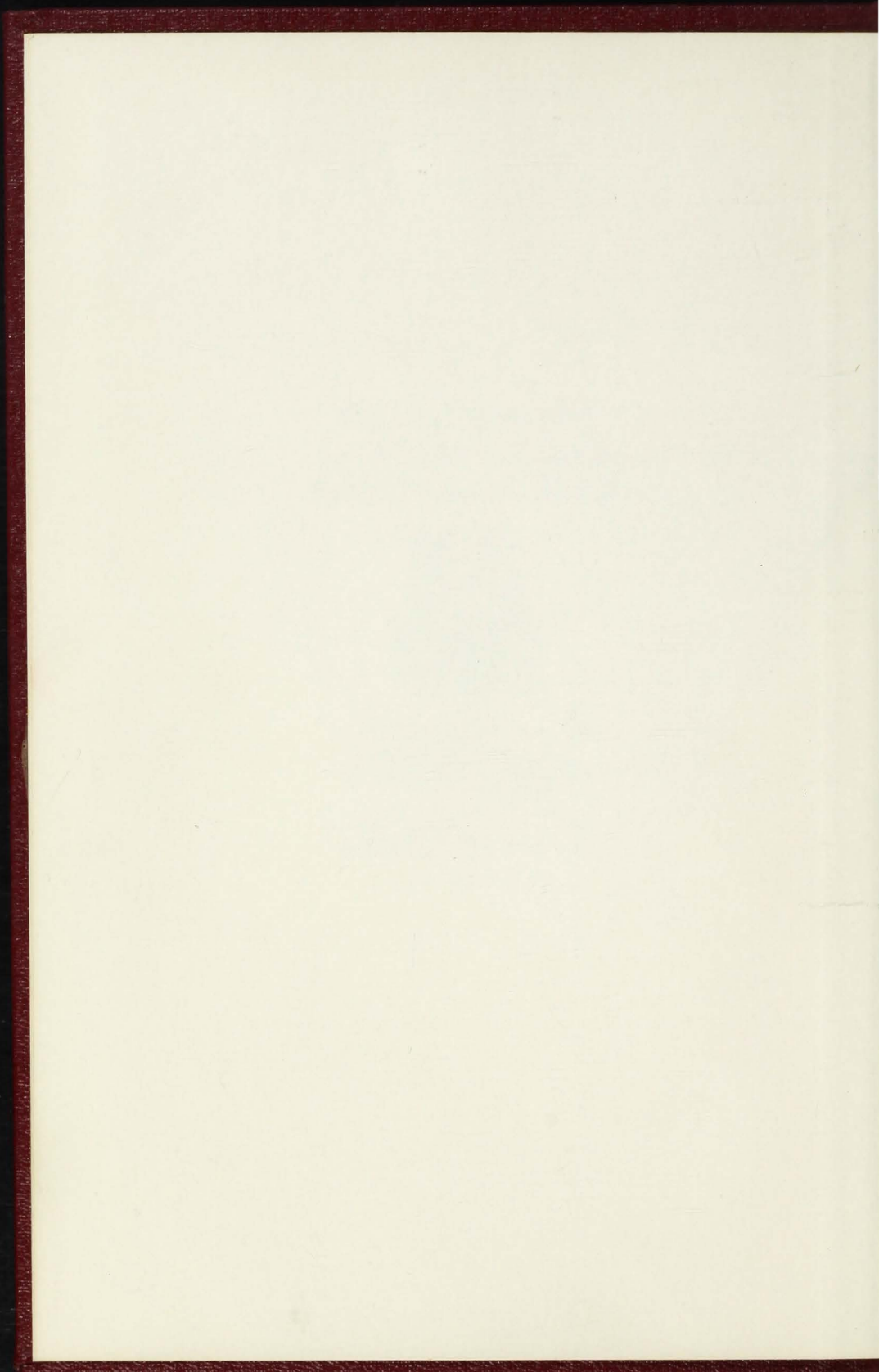
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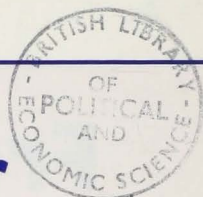
French Lessons for Labour



Denis MacShane

Fabian Tract 512

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Denis MacShane has been a trade union official since 1977 and currently works for the Geneva based International Metalworkers Federation. He lives part of the year in France. His books include a political biography of François Mitterrand as well as studies of trade unions in Poland and South Africa. He has written on French politics for the *New Statesman*, *New Socialist*, *Tribune* and *Labour Weekly*.

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I. Introduction

For most of this decade the leading industrialised countries in the West have been controlled by right-wing governments – those headed by Mrs Thatcher in Britain, President Reagan in the United States and Chancellor Kohl in West Germany. The exception has been France where François Mitterrand was elected President in May 1981 followed by an outright victory for the Socialist Party (285 seats out of 491) in the National Assembly.

The French Socialist Party, at first in alliance with the Communist Party, and then alone after July 1984, governed between June 1981 and March 1986. Even after its defeat in the legislative elections of March 1986, the Socialist Party remained the biggest group inside the National Assembly. Mitterrand remains in office until 1988. France is now in an uncertain period of *cohabitation* (literally, living together) between a Socialist President and a right-wing Government. Mitterrand has the power to call for fresh legislative elections at any moment and in any case there has to be a presidential election by May 1988. So the politics of *cohabitation* are of interest to those in Britain who think that an absolute majority for one party is unlikely to be obtained after the next general election.

In the meantime it is useful to examine the record of the five years of Socialist Government in France and ask why the victory of 1981, a major electoral upheaval in a France that had seen 25 years of unbroken right-wing rule, should have become the defeat of 1986. For however brave a face was put on the result of the legislative elections in March 1986, and however pleased the Socialist Party was with its 32 per cent score in comparison with previous post-war results, the left in France was ejected from office. Unlike the German or Nordic countries, France seemed to follow Britain's example in maintaining a left-wing Government in office for about only half a decade before replacing it. What was it in the political, economic and social strategies of this

period which stopped the Socialists gaining a second term of office? Was it a question of policies that were fundamentally wrong in themselves or of sensible socialist policies that were inefficiently or incorrectly applied? What is the tension between carrying out manifesto promises developed over a long period of fractious opposition and governing a mixed economy in a world in which production, trade and finance are to a great extent internationalised? What role did foreign and defence policy play in strengthening or weakening the Socialists' position in France?

The purpose of this pamphlet is not to provide an assessment of every aspect of the five years of Socialist Government in France but to try to offer some political analysis which is useful to those formulating policy for post-Thatcher governments and for those who will have the responsibility of implementing such policy. The links between the British and French left seem tenuous and socialist politicians of both countries are unwilling to acknowledge that they might have something to learn from each other. But without even raising the discussion of the merits or demerits of the European Economic Community as presently constituted the future of Britain under any government is now linked with Europe. A greater understanding (not agreement on every policy) of what sister parties in Europe are thinking and, when in government, doing is both necessary, and, some might argue, long overdue for the British labour movement.

2. The Hopes of 1981

The result of the French presidential and legislative elections of May–June 1981 was quite rightly seen as an historic victory for the left comparable to the Labour Party victory in Britain in 1945.

It was savoured for two reasons. Firstly, despite its long and dramatic history, the left in France has hardly ever been in government. The Popular Front of 1936 collapsed after eighteen months; the post-war tripartite Government (1945–1947) lasted not much longer; and while there were one or two left-wing Prime Ministers during the Fourth Republic their periods of office were brief – a few months for Pierre Mendès-France in 1954 and a gruesome period marked by the Suez fiasco and increased repression in Algeria for Guy Mollet in 1956. In 1981, for the first time in French history the left took office with the prospect of a long period of power ahead of them.

Secondly, it appeared that the division between Socialists and Communists, if not healed, had at least been patched over. The 110 points in Mitterrand's programme were almost all drawn from the Common Programme drawn up between the Socialist Party and the Communist Party in 1972 and in the second round of both elections the Communists had urged support for Mitterrand and the best placed Socialist candidate. (Before the switch to proportional representation for the 1986 elections, French elections were fought over two rounds which allowed a great number of candidates to seek endorsement in the first round but then permitted a more clearly defined choice between the two best placed candidates in the second round.) Having campaigned together for most of the 1970s, the Communists had moved apart from the Socialists in 1978 yet Mitterrand sought to reward them after the 1981 victory with four ministerial posts.

Nationalisation

Once in office the Socialists implemented nearly all of the programme on which they

had been elected. It was an ambitious mixture of economic, administrative and social reforms, and on paper represented a sharp break with pre-1981 France. Five of the country's largest industrial groups were nationalised. And unlike the British pattern of nationalisation the 1981 French nationalisations included sectors at the frontier of technological development and profitable export-led growth such as the Thomson group (electronics and computers) and Rhône-Poulenc (chemicals). 35 banks and the major insurance companies were taken into public ownership. 900,000 workers went from private to public employment and the proportion of the economy under government control increased from 18 to 32 per cent. Some dismissed the Socialist nationalisations as being little more than an extension of classic French state control of the economy exemplified by the nationalisation of, say, Renault by de Gaulle after the war or the French aerospace industry by Pompidou in 1970. But Mitterrand claimed that the nationalisations gave him an "economic strike force", an industrial equivalent of the military *force de frappe*.

In themselves, the nationalisations did not transform the French economy. An emphasis on sound management, geared towards profit and international competitiveness, meant that whatever hopes existed that publicly-owned firms would guarantee or in some way extend employment have not been fulfilled. On the other hand the view strongly advanced in British and American circles that state ownership means poor management, bureaucratic interference, over-manning, lack of innovation and entrepreneurship has not been the French experience. The nationalised companies were permitted indeed encouraged to apply the managerial methods of the private sector including shedding of

labour, raising funds on the *bourse* and selling off subsidiaries. Yet because they were publicly owned the state had a crucial extra element of control in running the economy. There has been neither the flow of capital out of France nor the relentless selling off to overseas multinationals that has characterised the industrial policy of Mrs Thatcher. State ownership has permitted the retention of a manufacturing base and its restructuring to take place in a more orderly and less painful fashion than that dictated by privately-owned industry in Britain or the United States.

One problem that nationalisation entailed was the insistence in 1981 that 100 per cent state ownership was necessary. This involved paying out some £5 billion in shareholder compensation which added considerably to government indebtedness. Yet the new Socialist Government of 1981 was only fulfilling its manifesto upon which it had been elected.

Reforms

Other manifesto promises were swiftly implemented. The minimum wage was raised by ten per cent. Family allowances

went up by 40 per cent. A fifth week's holiday was introduced. Retirement age was reduced to 60. The manifesto had called for a 35 hour working week against which employers fiercely protested. In the end, a 39 hour week was introduced, but this had little impact either on unemployment or on workplace relations. The death penalty was abolished, consigning the guillotine finally to the museum. The Socialist Government made clear its commitment to other reforms especially the creation of directly-elected regional authorities.

The character of the new ministers in office was also important. At the Interior, Justice and Education Ministries were men whose outlook was very different from their predecessors. As Culture Minister in came the dashing, provocative Jack Lang, who claimed that the Socialist victory meant that "France had passed from night to day". There were also more women ministers than in any other western government and a specially created Ministry for Women's Affairs which set out to put into legislative and administrative practice some of the demands that had been raised by women in previous years.

3. Problems Emerge

In the first nine months of the Socialist administration some dramatic decisions were taken. It was a very clear break with the previous Government, in content and style. But was it the "change in society" or even more "the rupture with capitalism" that Mitterrand had so often proclaimed during the 1970s?

The answer appeared to be no. Changes were made but not the upheaval which had been implied in the pre-election rhetoric of the left. In particular, the Government seemed unable to do much about

unemployment, even though the Prime Minister, Pierre Mauroy, declared: "Each morning, as I arrive in my office, I say to myself, what can be done today to reduce unemployment?" In May 1981, unem-

ployment stood at 1.8 million and Mitterrand had made the need to increase jobs the primary theme of his presidential campaign. By October 1981, it had risen to 2 million and by March 1986 it stood at 2.4 million. Of course, by comparison with Conservative Britain the Socialist Government had done well to limit the rise in unemployment to 600,000 over five years.

France was no different from other Western industrialised countries in finding it difficult to cope with increased competition across a broad range of manufactured products from low labour-cost countries or the technologically advanced Japanese. The run-down in mass employment heavy industries such as steel, shipbuilding, coal and automobiles had been staved off to a certain extent by the previous Government with massive subsidies and these were continued by the Socialist administration. But the problems raised by the structural transformation of work, and the need for much less labour input because of new technology, were not tackled.

The effects of the recession

What the Socialists hoped for was a return to economic growth, internationally and nationally. It was that and that alone that would provide jobs. This was not entirely wishful thinking as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development (OECD) at the beginning of the 1980s was also predicting a return to world growth once the second oil shock of 1979 had been absorbed. Instead the deliberately deflationary policies of the United States in the opening period of President Reagan's first administration plunged the world into the recession of 1981-82. This recession coincided with the election of the Socialist Government in France committed to policies of demand-led growth produced through raising the minimum wage, continuation of index-linked wage increases for workers, cuts in working time and an increase in public expenditure of 27 per cent. But the result was an influx of imports as the demand pumped into the economy was in no way restricted to French products.

There were one or two random attempts at controlling imports as for example when Japanese-made video recorders had to be cleared by customs authorities at a small and ill-equipped office in rural France but overall the left was extremely uneasy about import controls. Partly this was from a long ideological commitment to building up Europe as an economic counter-weight to the United States and Japan. For France to endeavour to protect its own industries would make a nonsense of this policy and would set in train protectionist counter-measures that would reduce West European countries to a group of autarchic economic dwarfs. In addition, geography does not help a French policy of controlling imports. France has borders with six other countries and thousands of unguarded frontier roads. The horrors of illegal imports, giving rise to a black market and a dual currency, all argued against imposing import controls.

Devaluation

As a result the French attempt at reflation inside an open trading economy at a time when its major trading partners were deflating turned out to be a disaster. The one mechanism that might have lent some breathing space – a major devaluation of the franc – was ruled out. Mitterrand, rather like Harold Wilson in 1964, did not want the entry of a Socialist Government to be marked by a devaluation of the currency. As it was, a devaluation was forced upon the Government as the trade deficit doubled in twelve months. Inflation made nonsense of wage increases and voters showed their dismay at what seemed a confused economic policy by deserting Socialist and Communist candidates in parliamentary by-elections and local elections in the spring of 1982.

At summit meetings with President Reagan, Mrs Thatcher and other Western leaders, Mitterrand had made repeated appeals for joint economic growth programmes but he was simply ignored. His re-alignment of French foreign policy to move it closer to that of Washington –

especially over the issue of the installation of the Euro-missiles and strenuous hostility towards the Soviet Union – produced no response from the United States in easing its international financial policy. The first days of the French Socialist administration coincided with the last period of the Social Democratic Schmidt Government across the Rhine. Having adhered to a fairly tight monetary policy emphasising manufacturing productivity and industrial exports, Schmidt was not willing to change what had been, in his terms, fairly successful policies to please his newly-elected French *confrère*.

A year after electoral victory, the cumulative effect of inflation, a sinking franc and a plummeting trade balance forced the Government to act. In June 1982, the franc was devalued and prices and wages were frozen for four months. The warm-hearted Social Security Minister, Nicole Questiaux, who had dismissed the problem of mounting welfare costs by announcing that it was not her job “to balance the books” was dismissed. Wages were controlled and de-indexed. Social security costs were cut. There were major lay-offs in the steel producing region of Lorraine and in the car industry.

A strict anti-inflationary policy based chiefly on controlling wages was maintained during the rest of the period of government. Modernisation, efficiency and entrepreneurship became key-words in government speeches and Mitterrand made highly publicised visits to Japan and to Silicon Valley in the US to associate himself with what he considered to be symbols of the techno-industrial future. The symbolism was further underlined in July 1984 when Laurent Fabius, the technocratic, 38 year old Industry Minister, replaced as Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy, the doyen of French provincial and municipal politics whose portly figure and commitment to hallowed left-wing ideals seemed out of place in the world in which socialist France was obliged to carve out an existence. (Technically, the Prime Minister of France is the Head of Government responsible to the President who is Head of State. But the Fifth

Republic’s constitution which Mitterrand retained makes the President the chief governing executive as long as he has a majority in the National Assembly. So the policies and ministers of the two Socialist Governments between 1981 and 1986 were determined by Mitterrand.)

Manifesto promises

The Socialists had won in 1981 with a manifesto including a wide range of proposals. They were to involve a transfer of power within society and immediately to improve living standards. The problem was that in putting into immediate effect those generous proposals the Government was severely limiting its ability to transfer power within society because it rapidly lost control of what should be the most important instrument in any socialist government’s hands – its ability if not fully to control, at least to dominate and direct the economy.

There is a dilemma here. How can a newly elected left-wing government adjust its manifesto promises to an international reality which is none of its making? Indeed, can a democratic socialist opposition party win an election by limiting promises of immediate economic and social benefits at all levels if elected? Is the electorate so immature that it will reject a party that offers medium and long-term improvements but refuses to guarantee instantly more jobs, more income, more welfare if elected?

One conclusion that must be drawn from this brief look at the economic policies of the French Socialist Government is the international environment within which a newly elected left-wing government has to operate. To seek to implement policies without the fullest reference to what is happening beyond national borders (assuming that one is not prepared to seal off the country in some starkly authoritarian fashion) is to invite disaster as the French discovered. The French Prime Minister, Pierre Mauroy, on taking office asked two senior state functionaries to draw up a balance sheet of the seven previous years of right-wing administra-

tion. This was published but little attempt was made to link its conclusions with the extent or timing of the new Government's proposals. A more widely drawn national audit which involved input from more groups than civil servants, and which examined a victorious party's manifesto

based on information only obtainable once in office and in the light of prevailing international conditions, should be the counterpart to the programme drawn up in opposition and presented to the electorate as the manifesto.

4. Decentralisation

A major success in the area of reform for the Socialist Government was the creation of directly-elected regional government which marked a historic break with centralised state administration. The most dramatic reform was to abolish the office of Prefect, the representative of Paris, who since Napoleon's day had sat in an imposing mansion in each one of France's 95 departments ensuring that the will of Paris was enforced.

The office itself remains but with a new title, *Commissioner of the Republic*, and a new task – to help, advise and act as point of contact between the regional councils (and especially the communes too small to hire experienced local government staff) and Paris. The 22 directly-elected regional councils will have many powers transferred to them, but areas of national control, notably education (the content and form of syllabuses but not location or size of schools) and the police, will remain in ministerial hands. French local government pays for itself with locally-raised payroll, property and vehicle licence taxes and about half their income comes from central government. The regional councils and communes will now have more control over how the government funding is spent though a newly-created auditing commission will keep a watchful eye for Paris on improper budgeting. In addition, the Commissioner of the Republic will also receive reports of budgets, and can be expected to raise the alarm in Paris at any gross financial misbehaviour. So the system of interlocking checks necessary to

mesh together the work of regional and local governments with the overall policies of the state is still maintained. The single biggest gap in the new structure is the absence of any permission for the regional councils to levy their own taxes or develop new sources of revenue.

Decentralisation without the right to impose locally decided forms of taxation is less than the whole loaf, but overall the transfer of so much decision making to regionally elected councils plus the few powers for the communes is a positive democratic gain and, in terms of French history, a courageous reform of which the Socialist Government should be proud.

The Government also maintained the regional policy of its predecessors in order to reduce the dominance of the region around Paris which has 18.5 per cent of the population and 26 per cent of the gross domestic product. This has worked reasonably well, and some of the booming (in relative terms) parts of France are far from Paris on the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts. There is not the fantastic regional imbalance of employment such as

exists in Britain. Moreover, the theory fashionable for many years that the industry, wealth, jobs and development of Europe would be concentrated in the so-called "golden triangle" with its apexes at Paris, Milan and the Ruhr appears to have been disproved in France. A vigorous regional policy, though it has the

usual problems of companies taking maximum advantage of fiscal and other incentives in exchange for often only a few jobs, has worked in sharing out jobs and not allowing the market and company managers to allocate capital and investments to its preferred regions.

5. Party Politics on the Left and Running the State

Mitterrand's first act upon winning the Presidency was to announce that he was no longer leader of the Socialist Party but the President of all France. It is a vanity to which newly-elected national leaders are much given but in Mitterrand's case he meant it and it was only during his interventions in the few weeks of the 1986 election campaign that he again let drop the word "socialism" from his lips.

Mitterrand and the Socialist Government did not exclude the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) from contact with the Government. There was a weekly breakfast meeting at the Elysée between the President, Prime Minister and the PS Secretary, Lionel Jospin, but the newly-elected Government quickly settled into the role of being functionaries of "the referee state" and the rhetoric of France and the national interest came almost immediately to dominate. The language of combativity and class which had done so much to mobilise support in the pre-1981 period gave way to emollient appeals to "national solidarity". Appeals to patriotic sensibility or exclusive claims to represent the "national interest" are a special danger for the left; of course the rhetoric of the party conference in opposition cannot be maintained in government but the almost complete replacement of the language of tough and eloquent advocacy of the interests of those who put you in office by a

bland discourse which seeks to embrace and pacify all interests tends to leave supporters indifferent without convincing opponents. Mitterrand, as Head of State, was in a more difficult position perhaps than the other ministers but he might have taken a lesson from the tactics of Franklin Roosevelt whose strident attacks on Wall Street while President in the 1930s, and whose open championing of labour, although they earned him the undying enmity of American bankers and many businessmen, seemed to serve him well in the polls.

Party structure

The PS was not a sufficient instrument to help carry forward the Government's message nor was it sufficiently well-established to act as a counter-weight to the ministers. Founded only in 1971 to bring disparate left-wing groups together with the SFIO (*Section Française de l'Internationale*

tionals Ouvrière – the French Section of the Second International, the party title the French socialists adopted in 1920 after the split with the communists), the PS never developed into a mass party. In 1981 it had 200,000 members. Given that there are 38,000 *communes* in France – the *commune* is the basic unit of local government stretching from a village of a few hundred to a city like Marseilles the 200,000 party members (195,000 by 1986) were clearly spread pretty thin.

The French Socialist Party is a classical vertical political organisation with representativity channelled upwards from the base. The rough equivalent of the Labour Party's NEC, the 27 member *Bureau Exécutif*, is formed in proportion to the number of votes received for a general policy statement put forward by opposing tendencies at the congress, though congress delegates are elected regionally also in proportion to the relative support that different tendencies have in the country. This at least ensures that the congress is broadly representative of the grass roots membership. Between 1971 and 1981 the Socialist Party increased its membership, influence and electoral success under the dominating leadership of Mitterrand. It will be interesting to see what happens after the 1986 defeat and whether the party structure can survive the debate about who should be the presidential candidate in 1988 and what changes in party policy or leadership may be needed to win power again. What is clear is that the party emerged from five years of Socialist Government no stronger in membership or role. Party leaders had transferred to ministries taking with them top party activists as advisers. No thought appeared to have been given to how to maintain and increase the support of party members at the base. The introduction of proportional representation increased the power of the party secretariat in Paris and there was considerable resistance in the provinces to efforts by Paris to force national candidates upon local parties.

The strength of the Socialist Party lay in its control of big cities and when 33 of these were lost to the right in the 1983

municipal elections it was a major blow to party organisation. The financing and structure of all political parties in France has always been ramshackle and ad-hoc. The Socialist Party continued to be financed from a mix of private and corporate donations, income from elected representatives (PS deputies earn £3,000 a month of which 20 per cent is given to the party which in theory provides £2 million annual income), membership dues, income generated from control of municipalities and state aid in paying for printing as well as postage costs in elections. Reform of the financing of political activity was not part of the Party or Government programme.

The cabinet system

In Britain much hope is placed on introducing a *cabinet* system to reduce ministerial dependence on the civil service and to maintain better contacts with the Party, unions and outside groups. The 58 ministers in the Mauroy Government (1981–1984) each had a *cabinet*: altogether 683 outsiders worked in ministerial *cabinets*. "Outsider" is not quite the right word as the French system allows highly qualified civil servants to detach themselves from government service to take part in party politics or work as managers in France's publicly-owned banking, industrial and service sectors. About one-sixth of the Socialist ministers had this background which gave them some knowledge and experience of the inside workings of government, industry and state administration. Ministerial *cabinets* also had such political civil servants in them as well as those engaged purely for their political or personal merits by the minister. But detailed studies of the working of the *cabinet* system under the Socialist Government (see especially P. Birnbaum, *Les Elites Socialistes au Pouvoir*, PUF, Paris, 1985) suggest that the presence of a *cabinet*, in itself, does not make a minister's task more easy nor keep him or her ideologically sound. What counted was the President and his rela-

tionship with ministers. As one commentator noted:

"It was unclear whether President Mitterrand was indifferent to planning because Michel Rocard (Mitterrand's long-standing and popular rival) was Minister of Planning or whether he sent Rocard to that post because he knew planning would not play a big part in the Government."

Cabinets also became centres of intrigue and rivalry between different ministries and took on the political coloration of their ministers. Where a minister had a specific policy he sought to have implemented and this was fully backed by Mitterrand then there was no problem. Where doubt and uncertainty existed, as for example, over the reform of the education system, the fully committed *cabinet* of the Education Minister was not able to overcome the willingness of the President to compromise and eventually withdraw the proposed reform. In short, the system of ministerial *cabinets* is not a magic solution whereby socialist ministers will remain more faithful to their politics: drive, decision-making capacity and support from colleagues and above all from the Head of Government are far more important. On the other hand the recognition that civil servants are not politically neutral and the possibility for experienced civil servants to become involved in party activity, either as party advisers, *cabinet* members or even deputies and ministers, without losing permanently the chance to revert to their posts could add some expertise and experience to a party preparing for and then taking office.

The Socialist group in the National Assembly were also, in the main, excluded from major policy decisions taken by the Government. They were given far more of a role than right-wing deputies had been under the previous administration and ministers came to discuss proposed changes in laws with the group. But this was a technical discussion, the policy decision had already been taken in the President's office. The group was able to intervene in minor areas as when the anger of the deputies stopped Mitter-

rand from granting pardons to right-wing army officers who had betrayed France in the disputes over the Algerian war and the 168 teachers in the group had much to say, most of it unhelpful, on attempts to change the education system. But for the most part the deputies, like the Party, were largely passive onlookers.

The Communist decline

Yet if the test of the Socialist Party's success is how well it did in comparison with the Communist Party then another picture emerges. The decline of the *Parti Communiste Française* (PCF) is perhaps the spectacular event of the Socialist Government. In 1946, the PCF received 28 per cent of French votes. In 1986, its vote was under 10 per cent and it could not secure the return of a deputy in Paris. Its decline had been the corollary of the rise of the Socialist Party since its launch in 1971. This was partly because of the changes in the composition of the working class and the rise of new groups to which the PCF had little to say except "Place yourself obediently under the leadership of the working class and more especially its vanguard, the Communist Party, follow its directives and accept its turns without debate". Critics of the party were hustled from official positions and sometimes expelled. The PCF's attitude towards the black population was summed up for many by the decision of a Communist mayor to destroy a hostel in which immigrants from Mali were living. In contrast to its Italian sister party, the French Communists became ever more devoted apologists for the Soviet Union under its gerontocratic pre-Gorbachev leadership, and in effect approved the declaration of martial law in Poland and the suppression of Solidarity. The Communist newspaper *L'Humanité* lost half its circulation and the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) the trade union whose leadership is communist-orientated also lost more members – 800,000 – than its rivals.

So the Socialist Party emerged from five years of government with a much greater number of votes than its Communist part-

ner and rival. The question remains whether this is a high water mark of Socialist votes – at around a third of the electorate – or whether it is a base to which all other non right-wing votes will be attracted in the next few years. The

Socialists obviously hope for the latter. Yet, the failure to increase party membership after 1981 and the indifference to the reform of the party-parliament-minister-president nexus will be a major problem.

6. French Unions – the Missing Link?

Where democratic socialist governments have remained in office over periods of two or more elections, as in the Scandinavian or German countries, there is to be found a well-implanted, usually fairly centralised trade union movement which has a real presence in all workplaces, private and state sectors, blue and white collar, with wide-ranging collective bargaining responsibilities allied to considerable technical expertise in economics and consistent politics. These are not features, on the whole, of the French trade unions.

Fewer than one in five workers in France is a member of a union which gives France the lowest density of unionisation of any advanced industrialised country. Many reasons have been given for the low level of union organisation: the relatively late transformation of France from being a predominantly agricultural country to being a modern industrial state; a mixture of employers' paternalism towards workers and a very effective hostility towards unions; the tradition of revolutionary syndicalism and rejection of reform or compromise within the capitalist system; the major socialist-communist splits of 1921 and 1947, destroying unity at a moment when the unions had some real strength; the influence of the PCF in making sure that the political line of the biggest French union, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), faithfully echoed that of the party; the seduction of the pre-1981

state which consulted top union leaders in a quasi-corporatist fashion, thus providing access to ministers without the need to develop a mass presence at the base.

The major unions

The French unions are divided into five major groups. The CGT is the largest, with about 1.2 million members. Its membership is concentrated in the older industries, mines, steel, shipbuilding and production line manufacturing industry. The *Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail* (CFDT) is next with about 800,000 members spread out thinly in all sectors but with strong membership in the tertiary sector. The CFDT took off after 1968 when its flexible anti-statist, anti-authoritarian, anti-centralist line had considerable appeal. It was very much the

fashionable union of the 1970s and was publicly identified as a champion of *auto-gestion*, a concept which is literally translated as "self-management" but which has undefined overtones of workers' control, cooperation, decentralisation, spontaneity and grass-roots initiatives. The third general union is *Force Ouvrière* (FO), also about 800,000 strong, with most of its members in the civil and other state services such as post and railways, banks and a small number of industrial workers. FO was born out of the split in the CGT in 1947. Two other separately organised unions represent teachers and supervisory and junior management personnel. The latter union together with the FO have been more critical of the Socialist Government than either the CGT (up to the Communists leaving the Government in 1984) and the CFDT. In elections held for local industrial and social security tribunals the more moderate and anti-government unions did much better than the CGT.

Inflexibility

The union confederations remain aloof and independent from one another and there is thus no central forum in which the different ideas, political, economic or social, of the unions can be debated and some common line developed.

Action or policy initiatives by the CGT will often be denounced as communist trickery by FO, while positions adopted by the FO leadership are proof, in the CGT's eyes, of FO's incurable reformism. The CFDT has zig-zagged through various policies and is the most open of the major unions to new ideas and to a sense that both work and the workforce are going through a process of change which requires imaginative responses from the unions. But its flexibility has not been matched by mass organisation at the base which lays the CFDT open to the charge of being as much a think tank of left-wing ideas as a body that employers respect and governments must heed.

French unions have often refused to

negotiate and sign collective agreements with companies and rejected closed shop or checkoff agreements for fear that one federation (ie the CGT) might be privileged. As a result, unions have little financial resources and cannot hire experts to provide analysis to match the arguments put forward by employers. There is sporadic union militancy and agitation at the base, sometimes flowering into the great outbursts of 1936 and 1968, but after those high peaks have passed by, the failure of the French unions to have strong, experienced and expert representation at all levels once again manifests itself. There is some cooperation between unionists in different industries and, on occasion, between different unions (notably the CFDT and CGT in the 1970s), and this is often helped by the presence of a *bourse du travail*, a kind of trade union meeting centre cum club in each town. The *bourse du travail* privileges horizontal, decentralised, localised action at the expense of building a powerful, national organisation based on industries or other common linkages between workers.

The French system corresponds to the ideal of highly politicised militants, free from bureaucratic control, with good horizontal local links: at the top, the union leaders focus on politics and securing influence within and from the state. In between, the company, public or private, is not the major terrain for union activity via collective bargaining which is regarded suspiciously, except in wage disputes, as a mechanism for sharing responsibility with management.

The Socialist Government has not brought any noticeable benefit to unions. Both the CGT and the CFDT lost membership. In a SOFRES poll carried out in 1986 among 3,000 workers, 53 per cent did not feel themselves close to a union. In a poll carried out late in 1985 for the *Nouvel Economiste*, workers were asked whom they would vote for in workplace elections to represent their interests to the management: 36 per cent said they would opt for a non-union list, 12 per cent for the FO, and 11 per cent for the CGT and the CFDT. This rejection of trade unionism is par-

ticularly significant because the Government had endeavoured to pass laws giving workers wide new rights.

The Auroux Laws

The Auroux Laws, named after the Labour Minister responsible for formulating them, provided new legal rights for workers to elect workplace representatives, who would be given time off and other facilities. Union access to the workplace was also guaranteed and works' councils were given new rights to information. To begin with, the four Auroux Laws were bitterly opposed by the Opposition and employers. French managers had always opposed the arrival of effective trade union representation in the workplace. But four years after their passage, the French employers' federation finds them quite satisfactory because they have found out, as the above opinion polls suggest, that giving workers rights does not automatically provide for an extension of union power. Firms are now living with shop stewards and works' councils inde-

pendent of union orientation. Of course, the existence of the CGT, CFDT, FO, etc. shapes the attitude of managers and restrains those who would wish to move to a full-blown company unionism. But the extension of legal protection to representative rights in the workplace, although it has changed the precise nature of employer-employee relations, has not benefited the unions or altered the way companies are run. In 1985 and 1986, there was a witch-hunt of CGT militants in many factories, and neither the new laws nor their own unions have been able to protect them.

The Auroux Laws are an important case for consideration when debating future labour legislation in Britain. The two trade union and industrial relations systems are wide apart, but statutory protection of workers' rights may neither help their collective power and is far from being a boost to unions unless those unions are already well-implanted and popular with their members. On the other hand, it is difficult to see what even the best-intentioned left government can do to help unions whose structure and style do not persuade workers to join them.

7. Foreign Policy and Defence Divide No-one

France is alone among the major Western states in having very little internal political division on foreign policy or defence issues. This needs some qualification as there is a longstanding Atlanticist tradition but nowhere near as powerful as that of Britain or West Germany. The French Communists defend Soviet positions but support France's possession of nuclear weapons. While the 1980s was a decade which saw momentous demonstrations, debates and divisions over nuclear weapons, NATO and the foreign policy of the other Western democracies, the

Socialist Government in France continued unperturbed on its course of maintaining nuclear weapons, intervening with its troops in Lebanon and Chad, exploding nuclear weapons in the Pacific, and overtaking Britain as the world's biggest exporter of arms after the Soviet Union and the United States. Not even the Greenpeace affair, with its lethal state terrorism compounded by a cover-up in Paris, disturbed the bi-partisan consensus.

Nuclear consensus

While there is some technical discussion on defence policy, hardly anyone questions the acceptance of French nuclear weaponry, even in the Socialist Party's left-wing or the Communist Party. Why is this? The answer lies in the past occupation of France by foreign troops and the application of a logic which postulates that the defence of national independence requires a nuclear deterrent.

For British or American citizens whose countries have never been occupied, it is sometimes difficult to understand the sense of humiliation and destruction wrought upon France by the successive wars with Germany in 1870, 1914 and 1940. The French armed services have been unable to protect the country's integrity and have needed American help to defeat the Germans in both world wars. After 1945, the desperate attempt to maintain an imperial presence in Vietnam and Algeria collapsed in military defeat.

But the main factor determining French defence policy remains the fact that France, along with Switzerland, Sweden and Yugoslavia, is the only European country without important foreign military bases and foreign troops owing allegiance to another power on her soil. To put it another way, France shares with the United States the privilege of being the only member of NATO which is not defended by permanent bases and garrisons (even if small ones) of foreign military personnel. The decision of de Gaulle to pull France out of the military wing of the NATO alliance has had immense impact on altering the political debate about defence in France. Of course, the contradictions are there. French officers

take part in NATO discussions in Brussels, and a full disengagement of the United States from Europe, with the possible consequent nuclear rearming of West Germany, would terrify Paris. (Two jokes sum up the French attitude towards Germany. The first is François Mauriac's old crack: "I like Germany so much I am delighted there are two of them". The other is the French general's idea of the perfect German army: one strong enough to take Moscow but weak enough to be defeated by Luxembourg!) And, of course, in any nuclear conflict France would not be spared.

De Gaulle's expulsion of NATO headquarters and American bases and troops from France in 1966 was widely supported, irrespective of political or class alignment. De Gaulle also insisted that French nuclear weapons were aimed *tous azimuts* – at all points of the compass, with the clear implication that a de-nuclearised France could, one day, be as open to military blackmail from the United States as from the Soviet Union. France under de Gaulle criticised American involvement in Vietnam, Israel's occupation of Arab territory after 1967 and sought to distance itself as far as possible from a Washington world view.

Foreign affairs

Mitterrand, in opposition, had maintained a guarded set of contacts with the Soviet Union, but his main public pronouncements had been on the issue of human rights which he had made the banner of the opposition in contrast to the silences of right-wing Presidents before 1981. The invasion of Afghanistan and the

installation of the Soviet SS20 Euro-missiles in the run-up to his election produced a perception of the Soviet Union as an aggressive, expansionist power. In contrast, America in the late 1970s, after its defeat in Vietnam, its humiliation in Iran, the ousting of its client Somoza in Nicaragua and the weakness of its economy, currency and diplomacy was perceived as a weak defender of Western interests. The suppression of Polish Solidarity a few months after the Socialists were elected put the seal on the anti-Soviet orientation of Mitterrand's foreign policy and set it on a course where it was barely distinguishable from that of the born-again Reaganism. At first, there were some efforts to strike out in new directions. Arms were sold to Nicaragua, France joined with Mexico in recognising the left-wing FLM in El Salvador, the French Foreign Minister met Arafat, but these signs of independence did not add up to a foreign policy.

Foreign affairs is a highly secretive policy area reserved to the President of France under the constitution and Mitterrand had almost mystical belief in his role as protector of France's status and glory. Such an obsessive interest led to some considerable lack of balance. He considered the debate on the installation of Cruise and Pershing missiles on a par with the Berlin airlift in 1948 or the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 as a test of will for the West. It led him to intervene directly in the West German elections when he openly supported the pro-missile right-wing Government of Chancellor Kohl against the PS's sister party, the SPD, which hardly needed lessons on anti-communism or anti-Sovietism, but which was struggling hard to develop defence policies that would guarantee security, relax European tension and divisions and reduce the arms race.

Arms sales

As Denis Healey pointed out in his Fabian pamphlet on the twin threat of nuclear weapons and world debt, the contribution

of the arms exports to destabilising the development of peaceful trade and balanced economic growth is considerable (D. Healey, *Labour and A World Society*, Fabian Tract 501, 1985). The French Socialists seemed as unwilling as the British Labour Governments of the 1960s and 1970s to reduce or contain arms exports. The need to sell arms also severely limited the application of Mitterrand's human rights pronouncements and the eloquent defender of human rights, *tous azimuts* of the 1970s had nothing to say about the suppression of human rights in countries such as Iraq or Morocco, both considerable purchasers of French arms. The kidnapping and murder of French hostages by pro-Iranian Shiite extremists in Lebanon was directly linked to France's support for Iraq in the Gulf war. Iraq buys 40 per cent of French arms exports. The sinking of the Rainbow Warrior and subsequent imbrogio showed the extent of French willingness to protect its nuclear weapons system. Mitterrand's pointless, if headline-grabbing, meeting with Poland's General Jaruzelski, outraged those on the left who had welcomed France's endorsement of human rights issues in East Europe. Unprincipled incoherence marked the dying days of the Government's foreign policy. The indifference of Reagan and Gorbachev to French nuclear pretensions showed that in the superpowers' eyes the French *force de frappe* was not so much irritating as irrelevant. Although the bi-partisan consensus prevented these issues from being raised, French foreign policy at the end of the Socialist Government had made little impact on the world yet had sacrificed the *élan* and independence of de Gaulle. Moreover, the future development of a common European left-wing international policy, suggested in the works of the Brandt and Palme Commissions, remains unlikely to be realised while the French left continues to be obdurately fixated on national status, military interventions overseas, rapid deployment force diplomacy, nuclear weapons and arms exports.

However, there is a paradox lurking in the background. The removal of Amer-

ican bases from national soil did not lead, in France's case, to a reduction in nuclear weaponry or to limited industrial de-militarisation and a lesser emphasis on the armed forces – rather the contrary. Those who sincerely want all US bases out of Britain may end up with rather different consequences from those they hope for. The problem of national defence in the

context of over-armed superpowers, a divided Europe, a world which devotes a disproportionate amount of resources on arms remains the number one issue for many on the left. It cannot be said that the theory or practice of the French Socialists in government have provided any help or guidance in developing an alternative policy in this area.

8. Counter-Productive Reforms

The epithet “reformist” is one of the oldest insults flung around by those holding different political positions on the left. Yet, a socialist government without a series of reforms is a nonsense. The problem rather lies in devising reforms that are relevant, carrying them out in a way that ensures they have a real impact and bring clear and direct benefit to people and discarding those that either represent muddled commitments to ideological formulations or are likely to provoke such resentment from a majority that they act more as a stimulant to the opposition than purveyors of benefits to their intended recipients. Overall, the record of the Mitterrand Government was a good one in many areas such as justice, women's rights and protection of those in rented accommodation. But it is worth looking at two areas where well-meant efforts at reform backfired.

A. EDUCATION

In July 1984, 1.5 million people demonstrated in Paris against the Government's proposal to change the education laws and to integrate the Catholic schools and the lay national education system more closely. It was the biggest demonstration seen in the capital since the end of the war. The banners of the protestors were inscribed with the word *liberté*. The demonstration forced the Government to

withdraw the bill, the Education Minister resigned and the right was given a boost which set its confidence and morale soaring right up to the elections 20 months later. The opposition had stolen the classic tactic of the left – the massive, peaceful occupation of a city by committed demonstrators and had identified itself, however falsely, as the champion of liberty against an oppressive government.

A religious war

Was the row worth the damage it caused the left? Hardly, unless it is necessary for socialist governments to prove their ideological commitment to long-standing doctrine without analysing its contemporary relevance. The fight in France between Church and lay control of education is a century old and a matter of great passion to activists in the teachers' unions and the Socialist Party. "*Ni Dieu, ni maître*" – neither God, nor master – is a sticker still to be found on teachers' cars in France, and the hostility to the Church as a champion of conservative values and a redoubtable organiser in the path of socialist advance is based on considerable historical fact.

But a religious war over education was not something that a late twentieth century Government should have got involved in unless the issue was so central and reform so necessary that an all-out fight could not be avoided. The Catholic Church in France runs about 15 per cent of the schools. In British terms, they would be called public schools but, confusingly, in French are known as *écoles libres*, free schools to distinguish them from state schools. They do not occupy the same place as British private schools and in no way are centres of academic excellence. The children of the bourgeoisie in France go to state *lycées* and look down upon the church schools as rather second-rate academic institutions. Although Mitterrand's election manifesto promised that they would be incorporated into "a single, unified, secular system," the Education Minister proceeded slowly by negotiation with the Church and Catholic parents' representatives. He was right to do so as an opinion poll carried out in 1982 showed that only 31 per cent of those who had voted left in 1981 wanted the Catholic schools taken over, while a majority (55 per cent) said the system should be left as it is. A compromise was reached but was spoiled when militant socialist teacher deputies in the National Assembly insisted on amending the proposed compromise law to reinsert more anti-Church

provisions. The Church exploded and accused the Government of a double-cross and gave the right-wing politicians the opportunity to mobilise the demonstration and place themselves at the head of a defence of parents' rights and educational independence. From an outsider's point of view, other school reforms in France were much more urgent, especially the need to reduce the elitist, exam-dominated orientation which reinforces social division and favours the children of the bourgeoisie, but the teachers' unions so prominent in demanding government reforms of Catholic schools were equally solid in defending the existing system which favours interesting academic work in schools, absolute security of tenure and the lightest teaching load in Europe.

While the reforms in the field of justice were broadly welcomed, the attempts at educational reform were a disaster. They represented the wishes of party or union activists and were not rooted in objective social need.

Some of the lost ground was recovered with the return of Jean-Pierre Chèvènement to the Government in 1984 as Education Minister. He began his term of office with the remark: "There are two groups in our schools and universities. Those who know. They are called teachers. They are there to teach. The rest are there to learn. They are called students." He went on to insist on the need for academic discipline, emphasis on the three "r's" and a return to teaching republican history and civic values. It was an assertion of values at odds with some, not all, of the teaching methods that had become fashionable since 1968. It turned out to be immensely popular for student or pupil self-discipline and hard work to be associated with a Socialist Education Minister. The right having become the champions of educational "independence" between 1981 and 1984 were outflanked by a minister who refused to let concern for school standards be taken out of the left's hands and presented exclusively as a right-wing cause.

B. THE MEDIA

When the Government imposed its austerity programme in 1982 and confirmed it in 1983 by rejecting the alternative of leaving the European Monetary System and trying to impose import controls, the strategists around Mitterrand decided that as a kind of exchange for the acceptance of economic austerity the Government would endeavour to extend freedom in ways that corresponded to socialist demands. One such attempt was to revive the educational issue which ended in disaster. Another was to develop policies for the media which during the long years in opposition were often the subject of left-wing attack.

In fact, France, partly by design, partly by chance, has the most pluralist press in Europe outside Sweden. The design lies in the laws passed at the liberation in 1944/45 which dispossessed the owners of the right-wing papers which had supported Hitler before 1939 and the Vichy régime after 1940. A right of reply law and, more important, one that nationalised the press distribution agency were also passed. The latter means that left-wing newspapers and magazines are on sale in the most remote parts of France and the distribution censorship which is exercised in Britain by the two main wholesale/retail companies does not exist in France. In addition, the Government subsidises the press with cheap postal tariffs, zero VAT rating and, on occasion, direct subsidy.

The chance lies in the willingness of businessmen or corporations to put up money for left-of-centre newspapers and to support them during periods of low or zero profits. *Le Matin*, *Libération* and the left-wing weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* (circulation 400,000) all provide a width of reporting and comments. In addition, *Le Monde*, whose independence is assured by the right of journalists to elect its editor, maintains an objectivity and authority, and an influence because of those two values, which are not automatically hostile to a socialist government.

The plans for reform

The national newspapers in Paris provide a wide range of views and choices of news story. In consequence, the 1981 Government's plans for reform focussed on television and radio. In the latter area, the Government permitted the creation of 100 local radio stations, and after some initial problems over accepting advertising, this reform has been successful and worked well. On television, it was far from willing to be so liberal. An attempt to remove the direct control of the state was made by setting up a so-called "High Authority", rather like the BBC Board of Governors or the Independent Broadcasting Authority, to act as a buffer between the Government and the three television channels. Moreover, political appointees made by the previous right-wing administration were fired and some resigned. It was a period of considerable chaos in which television workers, journalists, technicians and others tried to insert themselves in one of the few examples of workers' activity from below auto-generated as a result of the change in government. Unfortunately, the employees were unable to agree on a common policy or common set of demands: at one stage there were fourteen different unions or newly created groups representing different sections or tendencies amongst the audio-visual workers. A brief glimpse of *autogestion* had turned out to be *autochaos*.

The press

The one attempt to legislate a major change in press law came in too late to have any real impact. It was a law limiting press concentration and, in essence, returned to a 1944 law which laid down similar provisions. The problem lay in the fact that the 1944 law had never been applied. In 1978, a group of journalists had launched an action against Robert Hersant, the right-wing press magnate, under the 1944 law. Hersant, a former Vichy collaborator, owns 19 national and provincial dailies and controls 35 per cent

of the national and 14 per cent of the provincial circulation. In re-asserting the 1944 law, the Government had difficulties in defining what it meant by monopoly especially as Hersant, in common with other media corporations, was involved in radio and television as well as newspapers. Although the law had been included in the election manifesto, it only became an issue in 1983 when Hersant purchased a key regional chain of papers which was sympathetic to the Government. But by that time, the right was back in harness and launched a major press freedom campaign and submitted 2,598 amendments to the law. Unfortunately, the law was seen to be aimed at one person only, and there was no sense that even if Hersant was forced to sell off his newspapers, the new owners would be any less right-wing than he is. In fact, the law was passed late in 1984 and nothing happened. Hersant had split up control among different companies and the Government would not take steps to implement its own law. In January 1986, he went so far as to take over two important regional papers in Lyons and Reims. Again, the Government was caught out, and by the time of the election in 1986, Hersant, now elected as an RPR deputy, was more powerful than ever.

The issue of media ownership and control and press freedom is exceptionally difficult for the left. What appears to be the lesson from the issue of media reform in

France after 1981 is the need to introduce any reform in the immediate wake of electoral victory. If left until later, it is a perfect subject for the right, however hypocritically, to seize upon as an issue of liberty.

Television

With television, Mitterrand allowed two new television channels paid for by advertising. He brought in an Italian television entrepreneur, Silvio Berlusconi, who dominates Italian private television, to run a fifth channel for French television in partnership with a French transport corporation whose owner is close to Mitterrand. Berlusconi runs openly populist, mass audience shows, many brought in from America, unleavened by quality news, current affairs, drama or documentaries. There was neither demand nor agitation for these new television channels and there was considerable dismay amongst French film-makers and others about the impact of Berlusconi. It seemed almost as if Mitterrand wanted to do something for the sake of doing something dramatic at the end of the Government. At any rate, the newly elected Government had said it may not let Berlusconi (in partnership with Robert Maxwell) go ahead with a direct satellite broadcast service which the Italian needs to consolidate his hold on Europe's private television system.

9. Including the Excluded

For champions of proportional representation as the *sine qua non* of British recovery, its introduction in France is worth looking at – though the 1986 legislative elections may be the first and last to be fought on PR.

One of the first proposals of the newly elected right-wing Government was to abolish PR and return to the first-past-the-post system fought over two rounds.

Principle and expediency came together in Mitterrand's decision to introduce PR. The principle lay in the fact that a commitment to PR was in the 1981 election manifesto and had been a key point in the common programme agreed by the Socialists and Communists in 1972. It was the latter who insisted on PR, feeling with some justice that they had never had the parliamentary seats equivalent to the number of votes they received in elections after the war. Proportional representation would overcome this exclusion.

But it was also expedient for Mitterrand to switch to PR and he did so after the Communists had left the Government in July 1984. According to the opinion polls in that year and 1985, the Socialists faced a massive loss of seats had the 1986 election been fought on the old system and in the event of an overwhelming right-wing majority in the National Assembly, Mitterrand's position as President would have been untenable. As it is, the revival of the Socialist Party in the months before the election now shows that even if it had been contested according to the old system something fairly similar to the current balance of seats between the two major groupings would have emerged. Successful management of the economy (which by March 1986 was showing near zero inflation, a slight dip in unemployment, and a healthily profitable public and private sector) combined with aggressive participation by Mitterrand in the campaign had done more to pull up the Socialist vote than the re-jigging of the electoral system.

National Front

By far the most important beneficiary of PR has been the extreme right-wing National Front party which now has 35 deputies in the National Assembly as well as 135 regional government representatives. It was the PR system used in the European elections in 1984 which first gave the National Front the respectability,

status and income that goes with winning elected positions in a democracy. The French National Front is a racist, anti-semitic party with an authoritarian programme of repatriation of "non-European foreigners", which it combines with anti-unionism and calls for stronger policing. Among its deputies are two former OAS terrorists, and a Vichy wartime collaborator but there are also doctors, university professors, accountants as well as farmers, small businessmen and party functionaries. The media have treated the National Front as a legitimate party organisation and provided relatively uncritical (in the case of the *Hersant* press, highly positive) coverage of the party leader, Jean Marie Le Pen.

A movement against the National Front, *SOS Racisme*, was launched under the slogan "*Touche pas mon pote*" (Don't touch my mate) and although its badges were everywhere to be seen and it organised a domestic Live Aid type of massive rock concert in Paris it has had nowhere near the same success as the much more vigorous and confrontational Anti Nazi League in Britain a few years ago. The widespread hope is that France's National Front will just fade away much as the right-wing Poujade movement did in the 1950s and the next election will be crucial in that regard. Voting by PR allowed into the political system those who had been previously excluded or rather those who felt that their policies were not sufficiently dominant in the two major groupings but the price, the appearance in parliament and regional assemblies of a fascist party, was one that had to be paid.

Policy on immigrants

Among those who were not seen wearing the open hand badge of "*Touche pas mon pote*" were the President, Prime Minister, or Socialist ministers except for the Arts Minister, Jack Lang, who sponsored

multi-ethnic cultural events. In general the Socialist Government's record has been timid and uncertain in handling its immigrant problem. France has always been a country open to immigrants and the overall immigrant population of 5.5 per cent is roughly the same today as it was fifty years ago. The single biggest block of immigrants in contemporary France are the 860,000 Portuguese. But two million of today's immigrants are from North Africa or further south in West and Central Africa and, as such, are easily identifiable. They face problems common to such immigrant groups everywhere in Europe. Crowded into poor housing, doing dirty, low-paid work, with high youth unemployment, the object of constant racial harassment from whites who complain that neighbourhoods and schools are being "taken over" by blacks. Moreover, many of the Arab and African immigrants arrived in the 1960s and 1970s without papers and face added exploitation and fear.

The main relevant promise in the 1981 manifesto was to give the immigrants (who often retain the nationality of their country of origin) the right to vote in municipal elections after five years' residence. This pledge was not carried out for fear of a backlash by white voters and so an important mechanism for allowing people to make their presence felt and change

the conditions under which they live – participation in the democratic electoral process – has been denied the immigrant community by a Socialist Government. The Government did a little for immigrants. They are now allowed to form their own associations and an openly racist law permitting police checks according to "facial characteristics" was repealed which perhaps is more of a comment on how backward France was in this area in 1981 than a tribute to the progressiveness of the Government. On the other hand the Government encouraged a voluntary repatriation scheme and did not rebuke union leaders when they made the facile and age-old equation between the two million unemployed and the presence of two million immigrants. Neither resources, nor political vision, nor generous leadership were provided by the Socialist Government in respect of France's black population. They remain as excluded in 1986 as in 1981. (Although the greatest athlete France produced in this period, the tennis star, Yannick Noah, is Camerounian.) Mitterrand's Government was solidly white. Ironically, it has been Jacques Chirac who has given Lucette Michaux-Chevry, a black deputy from Guadeloupe, a minister's post in his Government. He has made her the minister responsible for the French language.

10. Style

One of the successes of the Mitterrand Government was that of the Arts Minister, Jack Lang. Given France's cultural history one might expect this but left-wing governments sometimes exclude themselves from this area of national life through: parsimony of resources or myopic politicisation of cultural policy.

Government spending on the arts has gone up three-fold since 1981 and now runs at about £1 billion or one per cent of all government spending. It has been distributed as much to the high art of Paris – the *Comedie Française* and the opera – as to the regions and so-called fringe arts like strip cartoons, the circus, fairgrounds and furniture design. The Ministry of Culture also sponsored all-night music festivals in summer-time Paris.

Lang has made his political views clear. At a UNESCO conference in Mexico in 1982 he attacked “American financial and intellectual terrorism that no longer grabs territory, or rarely, but grabs consciousness, ways of thinking, of living.” Yet he has not lapsed into a chauvinist provincialism. Almost his first act as Culture Minister was to go to a Stevie Wonder concert and his ministry has financially supported the making of films by the Polish director Wajda and the Japanese, Kurosawa. Altogether support for film making increased seven fold under Lang’s reign. Britain’s Peter Brook receives a £400,000 subsidy for his Paris based company, the American novelist, William Stryron, was chosen to host an international conference on culture in Paris, and the Government has decorated American film directors. Art and artists of all disciplines and configurations are not supported according to whether they conform to some notion of “people’s or popular” culture but according to their excellence, vitality and originality.

Shortly before the 1986 election major artists and intellectuals signed and spon-

sored a newspaper advertisement endorsing the Socialist Government’s cultural policy and urging its continuation no matter who won at the polls. Among the signatories were Graham Greene, Anthony Burgess, Ingmar Bergman, Peter Brook, Arthur Miller as well as French citizens. Their intervention was not sufficient to keep Lang in his post though the success of his ministry has been a major bonus for the Socialist Government and won it votes and support. Indeed such has been the impact of a generous and all-inclusive rather than a sectarian cultural policy under the left that the incoming Government will find it difficult to indulge in the philistine privatisation that has characterised Mrs Thatcher’s approach to the arts.

For some the activities of Lang’s ministry and Mitterrand’s full personal endorsement of an expansive and expensive cultural policy will be criticised as far too much emphasis on circuses when bread, as it were, was in short supply. Other critics may feel that the flamboyant Lang and his refusal to restrict his sponsorship to “socialist art” (whatever that is) betrayed left-wing ideals. On the other hand the politics of culture under the French Socialists passed three tests which any left policy ought to achieve. They enriched people’s life in the community on a non-sectarian nationwide basis and did so with panache and style. They encouraged people and groups to develop their potential. They showed the state as a positive and liberating instrument and its intervention as an act that gains popular support.

II. Conclusion: What Lessons for Labour?

Socialists have always put a premium on analysis in opposition before action in office. The French experience of government between 1981 and 1986 suggests that a much more thorough interpretation of the world, as opposed to the nation, was needed at the moment of electoral victory.

The manifesto on which Mitterrand was elected was drawn up essentially in 1972. It expressed preoccupations of the 1960s and was premised on economic growth. It was mainly about *distributing* wealth more equally and had little about *creating* wealth. The socialists had ideas on how to make a beautifully planned pension scheme, efficient and smoothly running and a model for the world. They had no idea about creating the conditions under which a motor car or computer system sharing the same criteria could be made and little sense that one might be contingent on the other.

Economic policy

Demand was to be increased by increasing wages and transfer payments and this was supposed to get the economy moving. It did not work because of inflation and the growth of imports.

In addition the franc was devalued under external pressure three times in 18 months. There was no reason why it could not have been devalued as a deliberate controlled act by the Government at the very outset. Devaluation, of course, forces up the prices of imports which is important in France's case which has to import all its oil. The moment a government decision alters prices it is in the business of controlling national income distribution to some extent. The Government had already shown its willingness to increase incomes generously upon entering office. Within a year, for reasons mentioned earlier in this pamphlet – continuing inflation, massive trade deficit, runs on the franc – the Government intervened to freeze incomes and then main-

tained a prices and incomes policy. In this it was little different, as many commentators have pointed out, from the Labour Governments of Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. Generosity followed by austerity seems the rule. Would it not be possible to reverse this and get the austerity in first?

To govern, observed Pierre Mendes-France, is to choose. In 1981, the French Socialist Government refused to make a hard choice between the different, mostly equally worthwhile claims for more income, more funds, more financial support from different sectors. It found out quickly that the choice was made for it. If nothing else is learnt from the French Socialist Government it is the necessity of taking the hard decisions early on. Once an economy starts controlling a government rather than the other way round the latter is in dangerous waters.

The role of the state

The state has taken quite an ideological battering this decade from right and left. The convergence between free market followers of Adam Smith, on one hand, and libertarian, syndicalist anti-bureaucracy supporters of socialism from below has left the state pretty friendless. The great hope of many on the French left in the 1970s was for *autogestion*. But almost by definition *autogestion* starts from below. It cannot be imposed from above. However the Socialist Government did not stop any *autogestion* projects from being implemented. The 1970s had seen workers take over some factories and Socialist controlled cities, notably Grenoble, had helped with the formation of co-ops and invested in local enterprises. Michel Rocard, one

of the chief advocates of *autogestion*, had a powerful place in the Government but no-one arrived at his door with projects for workers' take-overs.

The point is not to decry the usefulness and need of such projects but rather to warn against placing excessive hope that there is an untapped mass of British *autogestionnaires* only awaiting a Labour government to set about creating hundreds of thousands of new jobs. The state at national or regional level through public investment (as in Reagan's America), public ownership (as in Mitterrand's France), investment guidance (as in conservative Japan), or labour market control (as in Sweden) may still be the only agent which can keep down unemployment and the only force capable of demanding and imposing the common duties and obligations of citizenship and preventing a decline into a mess of competing, sectoral pressure groups.

Of the countries cited above, Sweden is the only one which would correspond to some extent to a socialist project. But an effective labour market policy was ruled out in France in the absence of a numerically strong, coherent, politically and economically competent trade union movement. Without an effective counterweight to both the state and employers, a labour market policy will not necessarily favour the creation and maintenance of jobs. History, political differences and the lack of an organic link between the Socialist Party and the unions means that the best the state could do was legislate to extend some workplace rights. Worthwhile, necessary progress but open to repeal and accommodated by all except backwood employers. Starting from their base and divisions it was impossible in France to strengthen the unions as institutions. This may not be the case in Britain. Union reform is problematic and seen more in terms of the workplace rights of union members and lay officials, the legal obligations of unions, their internal democracy, and their access to government to help discuss policy and be represented in a wide range of institutions as a representative body. Is there no mecha-

nism possible in Britain for merging unions along mainly industrial lines and providing more resources so that they can match capital with analytic rigour as well as collective strength and generous intentions?

Furthermore, the extension of trades unionism into the centre of capitalist managerial control through industrial democracy is a priority. The difficulty of the French Socialist Government in creating an effective partnership with the unions and its inability to build up unions as an effective but responsible counter-force to a purely management control of the firm may be said to be its greatest failure and a similar failure would have similar consequences for a Labour government.

The need for socialist values

The relative failure of the French Socialists to set the economy moving in the right direction or to develop a positive partnership with the unions may be related to their dropping of the ideas and values of socialism soon after the election. By the end of the five years' government, Socialist ministers were openly saying that their main achievement had been to show that they could alternate with governments of the right. This may be so but it was a major scaling down of ambition and unlikely to mobilise mass support.

Mitterrand's and ministers' assumption of the "national" or "above party" mode so quickly after the 1981 election and thereafter until very shortly before the 1986 contest was more than a choice of language. It was a suspension of that part of the socialist project aimed at developing egalitarian values and practices in society. In a country that attaches great importance to *parole*, headed by a Socialist President with an extraordinary command of the language, the adoption of the discourse of "modernisation", "flexibility", "dynamism" is to dilute the reference to politics with the nostrums of the *Wall Street Journal*. The qualities listed above may be necessary but to emphasise them to the exclusion of other values that distinguish socialist from conservative

governments is a mistake. On all French coins the three words "Liberty", "Equality", "Fraternity" are inscribed. They pre-date Marx but each is an important element of socialist values. Of these, the concept least applied by Mitterrand was equality. Studies of the last Labour Government in Britain also showed that inequalities widened and poverty increased. If a democratic socialist government is to lessen those inequalities then some sense of necessary austerity, some imposition of standards of citizenship will have to take place. There must be some link between sacrifices and citizenship and equality – that, in addition to economic growth, is perhaps the beginnings of the modern socialist project. The call to equality, the call to sacrifice was not heard clearly throughout the five years of socialist government in France. They began by thinking they could please everyone and ended by being voted out.

In a sense, the Socialist Party campaigned until the summer of 1981, it governed until the end of 1985, it then began campaigning in the few weeks before the March 1986 election. There was no visible sense that on entering office in 1981, the ministers and Mitterrand worked out a programme aimed at continuous political mobilisation in the following five years with the respective local, regional and

European elections acting as reference points or targets. Instead, the elections in 1982, 1983 and 1984 showed large swings to the right whose confidence rose.

Compared with Mrs Thatcher's Government over the same period, Mitterrand's Government looks like a model of sanity, efficiency and reforming purpose. In comparison with some ideal socialist measure the dark spots and failures look bad. Which yardstick should one use? The one that counts is that of the ballot box and the voters in France returned a less than favourable verdict in March 1986.

Much is still left to play for. The 1986 election result is by way of being an interim poll. The presidential contest, probably linked to legislative elections, of 1988 or earlier will set the seal one way or the other on the Socialist experiment in France of the 1980s. Much depends on the policies of the Chirac Government. Much also depends on the internal coherence and self-discipline of the Socialist Party.

But the period of left-wing government that has just ended should provide an opportunity to the Labour Party to see what mistakes can be avoided when Labour returns to power. Labour may not always be able to learn from its own defeats. Perhaps by looking across the Channel it can learn from those of the left in France.

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For most of this decade, the leading Western, industrialised countries have been controlled by right-wing governments. The one exception has been France where in 1981, François Mitterrand was elected President followed by an outright victory for the Socialist Party in the National Assembly. For the first time in French history, the left had arrived in office with the prospect of a long period of power ahead of them. In this pamphlet, Denis MacShane examines the record of the Socialist Government and asks:

- Why did the euphoric victory of 1981 become the defeat of 1986?
- Why were the political, economic and social strategies of these five years unable to secure a second term of office?
- Were the Party's policies fundamentally wrong or just badly applied?
- What is the tension between carrying out manifesto promises developed over a long period of opposition and governing a mixed economy in a world in which production, trade and finance are largely internationalised?

By offering answers to these questions, Denis MacShane draws out some lessons to be learnt by the Labour Party as it prepares policies for government and by those who will have the responsibility for implementing them.

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