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Regionalism and Administrative Decentralization in France

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WHILE studying in a previous article¹ the powers of the President of the French Republic, we stated that the real problem of France was that of the control of the executive over the individual by means of a highly centralized administrative machinery, and that until the French were free to administer their own local affairs there would be little true liberty in France. We propose now to continue this study by examining in more detail the main weaknesses of the present regime and some of the suggestions for reform.

The chief points of the French administrative system are familiar to all students of political science and need only to be recalled in broad outline. For three centuries before the Revolution the monarchy had been gradually substituting in each province administration by royal officials for government by local magnates or local assemblies; and although complete uniformity had not been attained, and local Parliaments or "Etats" still existed and occasionally rebelled, the steady drift was towards centralization: the reign of Louis XV ends with a law of 1771 which abolished the last remnants of municipal liberty by making over the administration of hitherto privileged towns to officials who bought their office from the Crown.

Those who urge that the Revolution really interrupted a movement towards reform can find an argument in the administrative changes which Louis XVI introduced by a law of 1787. This measure created provincial assemblies in all provinces not already provided with "Etats" and introduced elected municipal councils in all villages not possessing a parochial assembly. These municipal or parochial assemblies received the power of choosing local officials. As, however, the royal "intendants" remained at the head of provincial administration, it may be questioned how far true local liberty would have been acquired; but the summoning of the States-General in 1788 and the sweeping changes carried out by the national assembly soon relegated Louis XVI's timid reforms to quasi-oblivion. The cry of complete decentralization was raised, the aim of some revolutionaries, of the Girondin party especially, being to transform France from a centralized State into a federation of autonomous communes. Elected officials or committees replaced everywhere royal nominees; the control of the executive over local affairs virtually disappeared, and the existing administrative areas

¹ *ECONOMICA*, May, 1921.

were completely altered by the suppression of the provinces and the redivision of the country into a much larger number of entirely artificial units called departments.

It need hardly be said that this was going much too fast. In some districts the new system took root, but in most cases the people were too unversed in politics to take up in this way full responsibility for local affairs. Anarchy soon reigned, the central government having no means at its disposal by which to enforce its authority if this was disputed. The situation became rapidly complicated by the new factor of foreign invasion; and the Jacobin party, who took affairs in hand in 1793, realized that unity and a strong government alone could save France. While not formally undoing the work of the last three years, they repressed every movement that savoured of local independence and to all practical purposes superseded local officials and councils, either by "revolutionary committees" of their own partisans or by "représentants en mission"—i.e., members of the central assembly delegated for the temporary oversight of particular districts.¹ Such measures, however, could only serve in an emergency, and in spite of some extension of central control by the Constitution of 1795 local incoherence remained one of the great weaknesses of the revolutionary governments.

On his becoming the virtual dictator of France, Napoleon Bonaparte realized that administrative reform was one of the most pressing problems needing a solution. Acting on the principle that the maintenance of order is of greater importance than the guaranteeing of any particular liberties, he went back to the monarchical system of placing all local executive authority in the hands of officials appointed by the central government. Municipal and departmental councils were deprived of any real power, and in spite of an elaborate system of electoral lists nomination virtually replaced election for membership of these councils.² The new system was in fact more completely autocratic than government by royal intendants. Every pretence at local freedom had gone, and the new Napoleonic officials, particularly the "préfet" and the "commissaires de police," were practically local autocrats.

Very few changes of note were introduced into the system by subsequent regimes anterior to the Third Republic. Louis Philippe allowed the election of municipal and departmental councillors and Napoleon III somewhat enlarged the functions of those bodies. There was, indeed, little reason why kings or emperors should have made any alteration in an administrative system which repre-

¹ Rambaud, in his *Histoire de la Civilisation contemporaine en France*, p. 66, considers that the Terror was largely due to the convention lacking legal means of enforcing obedience to its decrees, particularly to the levying of taxes and the recruiting of soldiers. Legal machinery being absent, revolutionary methods had to be used.

² Taine compares their functions to that of the Greek Chorus, listening, blaming, praising, but unable to control in any way the doings of the actors who always move with entire freedom.—*Le Régime Moderne*, Vol. II, p. 239.

sented locally the monarchical principle. The amazing fact is that the Republic should not have swept away this imperial legacy. It did carry out certain reforms—placing side by side with the Préfet a standing committee of the departmental council, allowing the election of mayors by municipal councils, and giving more power to these bodies ; but while those changes have slackened certain chains, they have removed none. The Préfet remains virtually as powerful as ever ; local assemblies are still largely helpless, and locally the French are governed, not a self-governing people. “Administrés” is a significant term.

The fundamental defects of the present system can be briefly summed up from three points of view :

The first is undoubtedly the enormous power wielded by the Préfet, and of which Taine drew up a catalogue which the lapse of years has unfortunately not robbed of its accuracy,¹ for as M. Hennessy said, as recently as 1915, “Although sovereignty still resides in the people who choose their representatives it seems as if the shadow of the dictator still hovered over France.”²

There may be much to be said for the American system of entrusting very great authority to a man chosen by popular vote for a specific length of time, but it seems inconceivable that in a democratic state such power should be in the hands of a man who is entirely outside the control of those whom he governs, whose tenure of office is theoretically unlimited, and who depends entirely for promotion on an ephemeral party minister. And this leads us to the second serious criticism we have to make, which is the interference of the central executive into local affairs. The French Cabinet has an agent in every village (for the mayor is as much an executive official as a representative of the community), and several agents in all important towns ; and all the dangers which result from the central authority going beyond the bounds of its proper sphere are to be seen in French political life to-day. The liberties which are implied in a democratic constitution are in practice withdrawn by an autocratic administration ; there is no room for local initiative or for a healthy provincial life which could form a

¹ “He can temporarily deprive the municipal council of its right to sit, and the mayor of his office. He has a veto over all proposed bye-laws dealing with municipal police or the upkeep of highways. He can annul mayoral decrees and to all practical purposes replace them by his own. He holds in the hollow of his hand, appoints and dismisses not only his office staff but everyone who in any way serves the commune or the Department, from the keeper of the archives, the curator of the museum, the architects, the headmasters and teachers of the municipal school of art, all elementary school teachers, the medical officers of health, relieving officers and guardians of the poor, local police officials, local tax-collectors, forest rangers, lock-keepers, dock superintendents, roadmenders, policemen. He draws up the departmental or municipal budgets, puts them before the councils for their approval, and remains alone responsible for their execution. Any inquiry into any matter of public utility is made under his control.—*Le Régime Moderne*, Vol. II, p. 287.

² *Les Régions de France*, p. 220.

valuable school for the wider world of State politics. The overwhelming preponderance of Paris over all French towns, the extraordinary position which the French capital holds in the commercial, social and intellectual world, is largely the result of the centring in Paris of all the organs of government so that local organs die of sheer atrophy.

But the situation is further complicated by the third consideration, that the executive is itself under the control of a legislature that can at any time dismiss it. The group system and the absence of dissolution¹ has brought about ministerial instability and given the legislature an abnormal influence over the executive. Individual members, whose defection may at any time overturn a ministry, acquire great importance, and one of the ways in which they exert pressure is by demanding the appointment of friends and the dismissal of enemies to and from administrative posts. Hence the hold of a deputy over officials whose removal he can to a large extent secure, so that the Préfet, powerful as he is, quakes before the local M.P., and it has been said with truth that the real heir of Napoleon is not the Préfet but the Deputy.

For years politicians of all parties have been clamouring for reform. Men of views as divergent as the late Paul Deschanel, the late Jean Jaurès, Maurras the royalist, M. Briand, and M. Poincaré have expressed their belief in the need for great changes.² In the face of this unanimity one asks why these changes have not yet come. To this several answers may be given. The strenuous opposition which will certainly have to be met with from the civil service is a serious matter, considering that any reform must be undertaken by a cabinet which its transitory character causes to depend largely on its permanent administrative staff. It also happens that time after time some crisis has arisen turning men's attention in other directions, or some more urgent reform has had to be given precedence, and few cabinets have had the leisure to consider any far-reaching schemes of any description.³ It may also be said that the evils of the system never appear as serious to the ministers in office as to the opposition. But the main fact is that reform would have come long ago had unity been attained among would-be reformers. Unfortunately, however, much as they may agree in their criticism, they find it impossible to unite when it comes to supporting definite proposals, and the advocates of things as they are still hold the field owing to the divided counsels of their opponents.

¹ See Mr. Finer's article on the "Group System in France," in *ECONOMICA*, January, 1921, p. 20.

² For extracts from declarations of these and others, see Charles Brun, *Le Régionalisme*, ch. i, and Jean Desthieux, *L'Évolution Régionaliste*, Part II, ch. i.

³ Most reforms have been carried through the persistent energy of extra-parliamentary organizations, succeeding in bringing pressure to bear on a sympathetic cabinet, or, more usually, getting the first stages of a bill through under one ministry and later stages under a second or even under a third one.

It is nevertheless undeniable that the movement towards administrative reform by local autonomy has made much headway in the last ten years. The Proportional Representation campaign, by demanding the removal of the single member constituency with attendant evils, was to many people but a preliminary battle in a greater struggle ; and although the R.P., as it is called, has not yet achieved a complete success—for no one could be satisfied with the hybrid scheme introduced for the 1919 elections—it is not too much to say that the single member constituency is gone for good, and the principles involved in the adoption of large electoral areas are certain to be applied in the near future to administrative problems.

The movement for decentralization may be said to move along two broad channels. Some reformers are merely demanding changes that will simplify the work of administration. They wish to relieve the Préfet of duties that might as well be performed by other officials : they want to give councils greater power and particularly to remove the need for the Préfet's consent to their decisions. Others go further in their criticism of the present system ; they see the unsatisfactory character of existing divisions, and are prepared to place wider areas under the control of Préfets, so as to secure more uniformity in the size of administrative units. But in all this they do not challenge the fundamental principle on which the system rests : that there can be no united France without a rigid uniformity of local institutions and no order without the executive having, through its special courts, the last word in any case in which a question of public policy is involved.

The various schemes of reform which are just now being discussed under the name of Regionalism are much bolder and go much deeper, resting as they do on a different conception of the State. They consider France not as a solid block but as a Union, or shall we say, Federation of large areas, each having a really complete and free life of its own, not, indeed, independent, or even as fully autonomous as an American State, but possessing institutions which would express its personality and its distinct existence. The basis of the regionalist policy is that no real unity is achieved by disregarding the real differences between the various regions of France, by endeavouring to reduce everything to one common system, and that the true aim should be unity through diversity and through freedom of local life.

In its broad principles the claim is not new. We have already alluded to the federative policy of some of the revolutionary parties, and similar attempts towards local autonomy were made during the Franco-Prussian war. But the failure of these experiments is quite irrelevant to the circumstances of the present day. In both cases these experiments were made at times of serious foreign danger and of national upheaval, when the great need was for all to rally to a strong central authority. But the fear is no longer that France should lose her unity, that any parts of the country should break away.

The danger is, on the contrary, lest an iron uniformity should be rapidly depriving France of that rich diversity of gifts which has made her strength. The uprooting tendencies of modern civilization so keenly criticized by Maurice Barrès in *Les Déracinés* are at the present moment a real source of weakness. The exodus from the land is going on apace : the influx to Paris shows no signs of decreasing, and France is more and more a body with a swollen head and atrophied limbs.

Regionalism would check the growing spirit of revolt against the iron rule of the centralized state and its multifarious activities. By limiting its sphere of influence it would strengthen its position when dealing with truly national questions.

The first problem is, of course, that of areas. The starting point of the regionalist campaign is that the present unit of French administration, the Department, has no real *raison d'être*, political, economical, geographical, or racial ; as a matter of fact, the only principle on which the division was made in 1790 was that the chief town should be no more than a day's journey from any spot within the area. Not only was it not attempted to make the Departments homogeneous, but an exactly opposite policy prevailed so as to destroy anything savouring of local patriotism ; in fact, Foncin, one of the ablest geographers of modern France, has calculated that out of eighty-nine Departments six only were really homogeneous districts, while but thirty in all had any kind of unity, the remaining fifty-nine being simply incoherent. Nothing can be done, therefore, until the division of France is made along lines corresponding at any rate to some definite principles. All reformers are agreed that there are far too many districts ; thirty-two is the largest number that anyone proposes and it may be noted that in 1788 France was divided into thirty-three areas. Some regionalists, in fact, would simply restore those divisions, but there are obvious objections to this plan ; partly that it would savour too much of reaction, partly that some of the old provinces were themselves artificial units varying very much in size and often with fluctuating boundaries. Others would simply regroup existing Departments into about one-third of their present number. They urge that this would be by far the easiest method, and it is possible that the plan might succeed, but it is met by the serious objection that fifty-nine heterogeneous groups do not necessarily become harmonized by being reduced to twenty.¹ Most regionalists favour a bold redivision of France which would recognize the need for giving each area a marked personality with some diversity of resources wherever possible, and in all cases a well-defined central town and some connected historical tradition. Nothing less than that, they say, will avail to resist the preponderance of Paris.

The divisions suggested naturally vary considerably from Foncin's

¹ It is urged, for instance, that the Department of Eure et Loir, of which Chartres is the chief town, is really divided into three districts that should naturally belong to Normandy, Orléanais and the Paris region respectively.

thirty-two to Vidal Lablache's seventeen, and the work of dividing would be fraught, of course, with great difficulties.¹ It is, however, worth pointing out that France already possesses "regions" for certain purposes that departmental divisions do not suit: she has twenty army corps, twenty-five appeal courts, and sixteen university areas. A starting point might be found along one of these lines of division; and it might be added that a kind of beginning was made in 1917, when the Chambers of Commerce of France were federated into sixteen regions for consultative purposes.

But the problem of areas is of relative importance only. As Mr. Laski says,² "Territorial decentralization does not touch the real root of the problem. The real question is that of internal organization within the different groups themselves," and this problem is twofold: to decide what matters must be decided locally in order to make possible any local life at all, and what are the best means of insuring the local control of those matters while safeguarding the ultimate authority of the central government.

It would, unfortunately, be vain to assert that substantial agreement has been reached among reformers about any of these matters. All that can be said is, that while some would go as far as to remake France into a Federation of Republics on the Swiss or American model, others would agree to a minimum programme that would include the local upkeep of roads, canals, waterways, local railways, tramcars, official buildings, poor relief, sanatoria and hygiene, harbours. Many would add to this list, elementary and some secondary education. All would probably unite in demanding as essential to local life the control of local finance. In order to exist, a region must have its own budget and therefore its own taxes. All direct taxes, some say, should be for local purposes, only indirect taxes going to the central body. These direct taxes should vary from area to area, as one tax may suit one part of France and another tax another. Uniformity in taxation is a mere superstition. What must come to an end is the present centralized finance by which the Government to all practical purposes both levies and spends local money. It should be possible for a region to float a local loan through local banks: and some urge that Post Office Savings Banks might well be localized and their deposits utilized for local purposes. But whatever method is used, the region must have its financial existence, and resources sufficient for the handling of big social undertakings such as old age pensions, unemployment and sickness insurance, which are really too complex and vary too much from district to district to be satisfactorily dealt with by the State, and which are, nevertheless, beyond the powers of small units like the Departments.

Once its functions have been defined, how is the region to exercise control and secure its own personality? The first and essential

¹ A full list of the various schemes is to be found in Jean Desthieux's *Evolution Régionaliste*.

² *Authority in the Modern State*, p. 350.

step is the control of its own officials, instead of their being, as at present, appointed and removed by Paris or by an agent of the central power. No one, indeed, proposes to suppress entirely the regional Préfet, who can exercise a very useful co-ordinating influence, but he should be there essentially as a controlling power to see that law is respected, not as an active agent. He must hold a watching brief, perhaps even with a suspensory veto, but no more. The region should administer its own affairs by the help of its own agents.

Once this has been established, regional government could follow the general lines of modern representative institutions. It would have a regional elected council with large powers, the chairman of which would be the leader of local life. Some have suggested that these assemblies might well be elected on a functional rather than on a mere population basis, and it can, indeed, be urged that it is as wage earners that the inhabitants of a region would mainly count. We can do no more than register the tendency, and add that the various regional councils need not necessarily be elected everywhere in a uniform manner: some regions might like to base their franchise on a different basis than another; and, indeed, one of the interesting features of Regionalism is the opening it gives for political and social experiments over small areas.

Apart from its purely political organs the region would have other institutions in which regional life would find its expression. The regional university, for instance, while it cannot be altogether independent of the Ministry for Education, should be largely self-governing and a true centre of regional culture. Attempts have indeed already been made in this direction by the creation of Chairs of local history at some universities and by important reforms in university administration. Regional chambers of commerce, regional church councils and synods, all have obvious functions awaiting them once their area is a real and not an artificial one.

The objections to Regionalism usually come from those who fear the setting up of local tyrannies and parish pump politics. The answer to these is that Regionalism would remove the present local tyranny which local deputies can exercise, and broaden the sphere of local interests. It is clear, of course, that there would be need for some extra-regional court to which appeal could be made from courts which might be biased by local feeling.

In addition to this, however, there are many who are genuinely hostile to the very idea of local life as subversive of national unity. They believe in uniformity, they rejoice in the disappearance of local customs, local institutions, local patriotism. They are the true heirs of the Jacobins.¹ To these there is nothing to be said, for they

¹ In October, 1905, the Federation Régionaliste Française discussed a proposal to adopt as its basis the following declaration: "The federation recognizes as its only enemies Jacobins of all parties." The proposal was lost but the definition is not inapt, as the Jacobin motto was: "*La France une et indivisible*."

represent a position fundamentally opposed to the regionalist conception of the State. They will resist Regionalism to the end.

Others oppose Regionalism on somewhat different grounds. They hold that it is an attempt to put back the clock of French development ; that the French genius is one of unification and uniformity and that federalist tendencies are totally unsuited to the French temperament, and are bound to fail after having led the country into serious difficulties.¹ This view presupposes a continuity in national development and character which we think unproved ; but even if this continuity be a fact, a resolute break with a bad tradition is a less serious step than the blind clinging to obsolete traditions.

None of these objections, in fact, touch the real issue, which is the practically unanimous condemnation by all thinking Frenchmen of the present relations existing between the executive and the legislative. The return at the last elections to a modified form of *scrutin de liste* does indeed remove to some extent the evil of the overpowered member for a small constituency, but does not go to the root of the matter. It is impossible to ignore the fact that Republican France has kept the local institutions of a centralized Empire and that a retention that might be justified when the Republic had to maintain its existence against powerful enemies has no longer any *raison d'être* now that the Republic is fairly established. To the argument that a strong executive will alone be able to keep Bolshevism propaganda in check, the only possible answer is that nothing will breed Bolshevism like the idea that a Republican form of government can only maintain itself by the help of despotic methods of internal administration. It can only be repeated that a complete overhauling of the administrative machine is essential to the economic recovery of France, and to the numerous constitutional reforms which are demanded on all hands.

Two immediate problems appear to us to add to the urgency of administrative reform. The first is the return to France of Alsace with her keen local traditions, local patriotism, her separate language and institutions. It seems impossible that Alsace should accept a return to Napoleonic uniformity and subjection to Paris. It was only last October that the Alsatian Popular Party passed a resolution suggesting an appeal to the League of Nations should the French Government propose either to disestablish the Roman Catholic Church or to abolish Church elementary schools,² i.e., bring Alsace into line with the rest of France on such vital matters as ecclesiastical organization or elementary education. If Alsace is granted autonomy it will be difficult to refuse it to other provinces of equally marked particularism, such as Brittany or Provence.

The other problem is that of the reconstruction of the devastated areas. The work is being delayed and hampered at every turn by

¹ M. Belloc in his *French Revolution* defends that view with vigour and persuasiveness.

² See *Le Progrès Civique*, Nov. 19th, 1921.

the need for governmental authorizations of all sorts. No village street, for instance, can be rebuilt without securing the central government's sanction of the general plan ; this sanction needs nine distinct formalities, each of which can take weeks, and only apply to the bare plan, the actual work necessitating further steps and further delays. A simplification of administrative routine, and a wide increase in the powers, particularly financial, of local bodies seem essential conditions of the return to full productive activity of the former war zone ; and the healing of the still gaping wound in the national body is a condition of the return of France to her complete activities, political, social, economic and intellectual.

Let us ask in conclusion by what methods the desired changes are to be sought. The wider use of existing powers is undoubtedly the next step to take. People have become so used to being directed by an authority from above, that they do not even realize that their bonds have been somewhat relaxed. It is, for instance, possible for Departments to co-operate for certain matters of poor relief, help to numerous families, training schools for nurses, etc., and as far back as 1910 M. Briand, then Prime Minister, urged *Préfets* to develop these inter-departmental experiments. Another measure of importance is the law of 1917, which allowed communes to unite for certain purposes which were best dealt with by larger groups, such as the relief of war victims and the rebuilding of devastated areas. Regionalists note with special satisfaction that this law allows communes to act together even if they belong to different Departments, which is a great blow aimed at the quasi sanctity of departmental boundaries. It is also true that the departmental councils could do more if they shook off their fear of the *Préfet* and if they were more backed up by public opinion. The formation of a National Assembly of the Mayors of France for the defence of mayoral rights and communal privileges is also an interesting departure.

But all Regionalists agree that these, steps as they are in the right direction, will not go very far. These reforms do not go to the root of the matter, which is the reality of regional life. Now this life is primarily a spiritual one. Everything must be developed which can help the continuation of a healthy local feeling ; local literature, local custom, local history. Administrative Regionalism here joins hands with what may be described as " Sentimental Provincialism," the inspirer of which is probably the poet *Mistral* in his attempt to revive the language, literature and traditions of ancient Provence, to re-create the Provençal soul, which was being crushed to death by the steam roller of an administrative and educational uniformity driven from Paris.

But if this regional soul is to be kept alive in Provence, Brittany or Lorraine, those who wish it well must themselves remain in the region. As long as the exodus to Paris continues there can be no regionalist life. People must be prepared to take root ; civil servants and teachers must cease to look upon a post in Paris as the aim of

their professional ambitions; landowners must remain on their estates and secure for their employees conditions of life that will not force them to emigrate to big towns for a livelihood. The problem is therefore largely bound up with that of the economic conditions which are developing centralized industrialism at the expense of agriculture, and draining away men and wealth from the countryside to large urban areas.

All these reforms will not come without much hard work in the educating of public opinion, or without personal self-sacrifice on the part of those who are convinced that the restoration of a healthy and full local life is essential to France if she is to maintain her position in the vanguard of civilization. In his recent study of French political conditions,¹ Lord Bryce admits his belief in the soundness of regionalist proposals, but thinks that "the idea has not so far won popular support as to make it probable that the legislature will give it practical effect at a time when other grave matters are occupying the public mind." This is true enough, but unless French public opinion sufficiently realizes the urgent need for sweeping changes in its administrative system it will find that it is lacking the very instruments which are needed for the satisfactory handling of those "other grave matters."

¹ *Modern Democracies*, Vol. I, p. 320.