Departmental Secretaries in France

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This chapter examines the role of departmental secretaries in France. It will be suggested that, in contrast to some of the more long-standing and well-known accounts of the French public service, departmental secretaries do not comprise an homogeneous set of actors. There are commonalities between them, but their origins, behaviour and future career trajectories remain quite varied. The result is a certain shared experience but one which is lived by different individuals in different ways.

Politics and administration in France: traditions and change

In France, as elsewhere, the role of departmental secretaries is conditioned by the basic political and administrative traditions within which the system works. The key political characteristic concerns the presence of a twin-headed executive with both a strong head of state and an active head of government. The key administrative characteristic relates to a powerful and highly centralised set of state institutions. It should be noted, though, that in recent times both elements of the French administrative tradition have been challenged.

The Fifth French Republic was established in late 1958 replacing the Fourth Republic (1946-58) which was beset by extreme governmental instability.[1] Initially, the Fifth Republic was structured as a parliamentary system with an indirectly elected president who served for seven years and a prime minister who was responsible to the lower house of the legislature, the National Assembly. However, in 1962 the constitution was reformed to provide for the direct election of the president. Since this time, therefore, the

Fifth Republic has operated with a semi-presidential form of government (Duverger 1970; Elgie 1999). Even prior to this reform, though, power within the government was skewed towards the president. Indeed, there is a vast literature on the apparent presidentialisation of the regime (see, for example, Gicquel, 1995).

That said, the president's power is limited in two respects. Firstly, presidential pre-eminence is contingent upon a favourable parliamentary majority and for much of the Fifth Republic such a majority has been forthcoming. On three occasions, though, the majority has opposed the president and power has shifted to the prime minister (1986-88, 1993-95 and 1997 to date). Secondly, whatever the majority, the prime minister is still a key figure within the system. Article 21 of the 1958 constitution states that the prime minister is in general charge of the government's work and is responsible for the implementation of laws.[2] Thus, the prime minister is always at the heart of the governmental machine and is charged with overseeing the day-to-day functioning of the policy-making process including the coordination of the administration.

The net result of this situation is that in France departmental secretaries operate within the confines of a twin-headed political executive in which both the president and prime minister are significant political actors. So, departmental secretaries have to contend directly with the minister, the prime minister and the president and it is the often complicated relationship between these three actors that provides the political context within which the most senior members of the administration operate. So, for example, on some occasions, the minister and prime minister may be allied against the president. On other occasions, though, the minister may try to short-circuit the prime minister and seek the favour of the head of state personally. Whatever the situation, departmental secretaries cannot help but be drawn into these political battles. Indeed, as will be seen, their own position may at

times depend on the success or otherwise of the alliances made at the political level.

In addition to the political context, departmental secretaries in France also operate within a long and well-established administrative tradition. Central to this tradition is the basic distinction between the public sphere and the private. The former is said to be the incarnation of the general will, the common good, or the national interest. By contrast, the latter is viewed as essentially self-interested behaviour and, therefore, potentially divisive. Needless to say, in practice this distinction is by no means clear cut and the above representations are little more than caricatural. At the same time, however, it also provides the underlying rationale for one of the main features of the French system, namely a strong state. There has been a long-standing belief in the benefits of state intervention among members of the political elite. The result is that over the years the French state developed as a highly centralised and strongly directive (or *dirigiste*) force.[3] Moreover, it has also led to a system of administrative training schools (the *grandes écoles*) designed to create a class of elite public sector officials whose prime function is to serve the state rationally and disinterestedly.

As might be expected, this aspect of the French administrative tradition has had a considerable effect on the role of departmental secretaries. As will be seen, a substantial proportion of them have studied at one or other of the *grandes écoles*. Their training is, thus, profoundly state-centric. They are imbued with the ethos of the state, even if their interpretation of it is necessarily individual (see the personal accounts below). Moreover, in many cases departmental secretaries head organisations with a considerable policy reach and their decisions frequently have wide-ranging implications for the well-being of ordinary citizens. The result is that they have an administrative and social responsibility which they do not take lightly. Indeed, this point still

applies, even though the scope of state intervention has been reduced in certain domains (see below).

There is no doubt, therefore, that departmental secretaries are central to the functioning of the French state. There is also no doubt, though, that over the years the legitimacy of the state has been increasingly contested. The classic critique in this regard comes from Crozier (1963; 1970). Here, the main line of argument is that the strength of the state is also its main source of weakness. The state, it is said, is impersonal and becomes increasingly removed from the citizenry. This feature, combined with the cultural observation that the French eschew face-to-face negotation and compromise, renders the state extremely fragile as it is unable to respond to a changing society. In this context, the disjunction between state and society is said to grow ever greater until there is an outburst of popular discontentment that leads to a degree of reform. According to this line of thought, the key task is to 'unblock' the state and make it more responsive to social demands (Crozier, 1979).

The political response to this critique has varied. In general terms, the left has tended to emphasise the need for the decentralisation of state power and the deconcentration of public sector resources with the aim of bringing decision-making closer to the citizenry. Indeed, the most enduring legacy of the Mitterrand presidency (1981-95) was undoubtedly the reorganisation of local-level institutions. These reforms created a new regional tier of elected local authorities. They also extended the powers of local decision-makers, notably mayors. The net result has been the rise of a multi-level form of governance in which state and social actors are joint partners (Le Galès, 1995). By contrast, the right has tended to promote privatisation as a solution to the supposedly unmanageable and overweening state. There have been two main waves of privatisation (1986-87 and 1993-97) during which time all or part of a considerable number of high-profile public sector concerns have been sold

off. These included banks, insurance companies, the main television station (TF1) and several utilities, such as France Telecom.[4]

These reforms have had some effect on the role of departmental secretaries. Most notably, they have increased the number of actors with which most departmental secretaries have to deal. For example, there are now close links between local actors and departmental secretaries, notably concerning the preparation of the centre-local planning contracts. In addition, it might be argued that these reforms, and others, have served to reduce somewhat the lustre of the higher civil service. The state is no longer in as powerful a position as it was before. Thus, service to the state is no longer seen to be as prestigious as it was before. So, while it would be wrong to suggest that departmental secretaries occupy anything other than a highly coveted position within the state, there is also a sense in which the role of the state itself and, by extension, state officials is now being increasingly questioned both outside and indeed within the public service.

The impact of the decentralisation and privatisation reforms has not been matched by an equivalent set of managerial-style changes to government departments. There have been two main reforms in this respect. The first was introduced in 1989 by the socialist prime minister, Michel Rocard. The so-called *renouveau du service public*, or renewal of the public sector, was designed to modernise the administrative system by creating a greater degree of flexibility in the 'grid' system of pay differentials, by devolving certain executive management functions from central ministries to departmental field services, by introducing programme evaluation and by simplifying certain administrative procedures. The second was the *Réforme de l'État et des services publics* proposed in 1995 by the gaullist prime minister, Alain Juppé. This reform had a similar set of aims, focusing once again on issues such as deconcentration and performance evaluation, but this time included more specific proposals concerning contractualisation. The fact

remains, though, that neither reform fundamentally transformed the functioning of government departments. As one set of writers put it, despite such reform proposals "much of the machinery of a centralized civil service remains fundamentally unaltered" (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000: 231).[5]

Plans to reform the administration have come up against two main obstacles. The first is the higher civil service itself. There is an entrenched belief amongst this class of people that they are already engaging in a process of rational decision-making. This is the essence of their training at the *grandes écoles*. However, on the basis of this assumption it follows that there are no efficiencies to be gained from managerial reform. Thus, the higher civil service has not promoted mangerialism as an end in itself. The second obstacle is the public sector unions. The level of unionisation in France is relatively low. However, public sector unions remain strong and active. They mobilised extremely effectively to stop the Juppé reforms of the social security system and pension funds in 1995. They are also a core component of the left's electoral constituency. They are, thus, in a strategically important position to stop or at least considerably dilute the reform process.

The result of this situation is that the role of a departmental secretary now is still extremely similar to the equivalent role thirty years ago. True, there is a slightly greater degree of managerial flexibility in the current period than before. For example, some departmental secretaries have the power to reward individual performance.[6] There is also a slightly greater degree of interministerial coordination and evaluation than was previously the case. For the most part, though, the job remains largely unchanged. The opportunities for individual innovation are relatively small. Instead, the key to reform is political will. Currently, though, the will to transform the system is mainly notable by its absence.

Against this background, the role of French departmental secretaries will now be explored. The aims are to identify this class of people in the

French system, to show that a proportion of them have certain common educational, social and professional links, to demonstrate that they constitute a somewhat politicised elite, to outline the tensions inherent in their functions, and to provide two personal accounts of how French departmental secretaries view themselves.

Who are the French departmental secretaries?

The internal organisation of French departments is markedly different from their British counterparts. Indeed, so different are the two systems that the first problem to be encountered when studying French departmental secretaries is to identify exactly who these people are. There simply is no exact equivalent of the British permanent secretary in the French case. That said, in the French system of government there are people who resemble British-style permanent secretaries quite closely. They are the *directeurs d'administration centrale* and the *directeurs* of ministerial *cabinets*.[7] True, these people occupy two distinct positions in the French administrative system and neither of these positions corresponds exactly to the system in the British case. However, the fact that there are two such positions in France is a direct consequence of the basic internal differences between British and French ministries. These differences concern the organisation of departmental line hierarchies in the two countries and the institutionalised presence in France of ministerial *cabinets*. In this way, the identification of French-style departmental secretaries flows from the peculiarities of the French system. It is not the result of trying to impose an unnatural form of categorisation on a very different type of system.

The first difference between British and French departments relates to the organisation of departmental line hierarchies. In 1882 the organisation of French departments was profoundly reformed. Prior to this time, each

Ministry had an overarching *secrétariat général*, headed by a *secrétaire général*. As such, there were clear similarities between the position of French *secrétaires généraux* and British permanent secretaries. After the reform, though, most French departments were split into *directions*, or *directions générales*, each of which was headed by either a *directeur* or a *directeur général* respectively.[8] Since this time the number of *directions* has always varied from department to department. In some junior ministries there may only be two or three *directions*. However, in a large department there may be more than a dozen all told. By and large *directions* are organised vertically, or sectorally. In other words, each has responsibility for a particular policy remit. Some *directions*, though, are organised horizontally and coordinate a certain aspect of the department's work. For example, a number of departments have a general financial and administrative affairs direction (DAFAG) which is responsible for personnel issues and for drawing together the departmental budget submission. That said, it might be noted that the Foreign Affairs Ministry has always maintained its original structure and is still headed by a *secrétaire général*.[9] Moreover, it might also be noted that the French equivalent of the British Cabinet Office, the *Secrétariat général du gouvernement*, is also headed by a single figure. There is, thus, a clear equivalent of the British Cabinet Secretary in the French system. For the most part, though, *directions* are the basic stand-alone organisational units within a Ministry. As a result, French departments are highly fragmented. There is no single administrative figure at the head of the department. In this sense, there is no distinct departmental secretary. However, the *directeurs d'administration centrale* are one the nearest French equivalents to British permanent secretaries in that they are at the head of the different *directions* within the department. As such, it is reasonable to focus on them for the purposes of this study.

The second difference between Britain and France concerns the French system of ministerial *cabinets*. Since the time of the Third Republic it has

become the established practice for every minister, as well as the president and the prime minister, to appoint a set of personal advisers who are collectively known as the *cabinet*. The general function of a *cabinet* is to serve and assist the minister's political and policy-making role. In the past, ministers were officially allowed to appoint up to ten people to their *cabinet*, whereas the figure for junior ministers (*Ministres délégués* and *Secrétariats d'État*) was seven. However, in 1995, ministers were restricted to five appointments and junior ministers to only three. These rules, though, have since been relaxed. In any case, there have never been any limitations on the number of people that both the prime minister and the president may appoint and ministers have always made unofficial appointments so inflating the actual number of people who are part of the *cabinet* system. In terms of the present study one key aspect of the French system is that *cabinets* are organised hierarchically. Each *cabinet* is headed by a *directeur de cabinet*. The *directeur de cabinet* works closely with the minister and is undoubtedly the minister's most loyal and most immediate interlocutor. Again, therefore, while there are no doubt many dissimilarities between French *directeurs de cabinet* and British permanent secretaries, the former can be considered to be a reasonable equivalent of the latter.[10]

One consequence of the differences between the organisation of British and French departments is that the number of departmental secretaries in the French case is much higher than the equivalent figure in the British case. Indeed, the figure in France is much higher than the equivalent figure in all of the other countries examined in this study. So, for example, in 1983 one writer identified 154 *directions* and *direction générales* in the French system (Salon 1983: 141).[11] Similarly, another writer calculated that at any one time there was an average of 160 *directions* from 1984-94 (Rouban 1996: 22). Yet another writer has suggested an average figure of 170 (Quermonne 1991: 64). In fact, there was a grand total of 555 different *directeurs d'administration centrale* from

1984-94 (Rouban 1996: 19). In addition, at any one time there are also usually between 30-40 *directeurs de cabinet* in the system. Indeed, in 1988 there were 48 ministers and from 1984-96 there were 412 *directeurs de cabinet* in all (Rouban 1997a: 18).[12] As a result, therefore, at any given point there are likely to be around 200 people in the French system who are the equivalent of British permanent secretaries. Moreover, given that the present study is dealing with a 30 year period and that, as will be shown, the average tenure of a French departmental secretary is about three years, this means that there were approximately 2,000 different departmental secretaries in France from 1970-99.

In this general context, two preliminary remarks should be made. Firstly, it is simply beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a profile of every departmental secretary from 1970-99. The net result is that the analysis in the following sections is necessarily partial and can provide only an indication of general trends throughout the whole period under consideration.[13] Secondly, by virtue of the fact that there are so many of them, French departmental secretaries comprise a varied set of people at any one point in time. Thus, to say that only general trends can be identified is somewhat more than just a methodological caveat. It is also a fundamental observation about the nature of the French higher public service. In contrast to certain studies,[14] the argument in this chapter is that in France there is a great variety to departmental secretaries. They come from a large range of backgrounds; they head many different types of organisations; and subsequently their career paths diverge. Thus, while in some respects it is possible to establish a *portrait robot* of the average French departmental secretary, the indistinct nature of any such picture should be noted.

Education, social and professional background: some statistics

This section draws exclusively on material from two sources. The first is a study by Siwek-Pouydesseau (1969). This work considers the background of *directeurs d'administration centrale* just prior to the general period under consideration in this book. However, it is a relatively comprehensive study and does provide a useful comparison with other more up-to-date work. The second is a paper by Luc Rouban (1996), which is a detailed study of all the *directeurs d'administration centrale* who held office from 1984-94. True, it examines only one element of the set of French departmental secretaries as defined in this chapter and it covers only one part of the period under consideration in the book as a whole. Nevertheless, the comprehensive nature of the study means that it constitutes the major reference work of its type and is, thus, an invaluable resource. These two studies provide the best material currently available on this topic and so they will provide the raw data for the analysis in this section.[15]

According to Rouban, from 1984-94 an overwhelming percentage of *directeurs d'administration centrale* were male. Indeed, only 3.8 per cent were female.[16] In addition, the average age of *directeurs* at the time of their appointment was 47 and they served in office for an average of 3.6 years. In these respects, the similarities with the Siwek-Pouydesseau study are striking. She concluded that in the period from 1958-66 *directeurs* served for an average of around three and a half years, that the average age of an incumbent *directeur* was around 51 and that there were very few female *directeurs*, to the point that in 1967 there was not a single serving female *directeur*. Thus, there appears to have been little change over time.

In terms of their educational background, Rouban's study showed that only 0.9 per cent of *directeurs d'administration centrale* had no higher education qualification whatsoever, whereas 61.7 per cent had two such qualifications and 13.7 per cent had three. The most common qualification was the diploma from the prestigious Institut d'Études Politiques (or Sciences-Po) in Paris (34.6

per cent), followed by those who had studied law (24.0 per cent), languages (14.1 per cent) and then those who had followed a more scientific or technical path (13.9 per cent). Consistent with the traditional image of the French higher civil servant, 42.3 per cent of *directeurs* had then studied at the École Nationale d'Administration (ENA), one of the so-called *grandes écoles* and which provides specialised administrative training for fast-track civil servants. In addition, a further 13.9 per cent had been to the other main *grande école*, the École Polytechnique (X), which provides training for more scientifically oriented officials. Finally, 6.7 per cent of *directeurs* had been to one of the other training schools in the French system, while a total of 23.8 per cent had not been to any *grande école* whatsoever.

Again, the similarities between Rouban's study and Siwek-Pouydesseau's work are noteworthy. For example, the earlier work shows that an equally large proportion of *directeurs d'administration centrale* were very well educated with around a half of them having more than one higher education qualification and with these people tending to show a similar bias for law and politics/administration. The main difference between the two studies concerns the percentage of *directeurs* who had studied at ENA. In the previous period the figures were 7.2 per cent in 1960 and 14.5 per cent in 1967, both much lower than in the later period. The explanation is relatively straightforward. ENA was only established in 1945. Thus, in the earlier period, among the typical age cohort of those who were likely to be appointed as *directeurs* fewer people had had the opportunity to study at ENA. Now, though, everybody has, in theory, had such an opportunity and, as a result, ENA has become a much more common point of passage for *directeurs* as a whole. Finally, it should be noted that in 1967 13.5 per cent of *directeurs* had been to the École Polytechnique. This figure is almost exactly the same as the average in Rouban's study.

Figures on their social background for the earlier period are not available. However, in the period 1984-94 the statistics show that 50.5 per cent of *directeurs d'administration centrale* were drawn from the upper classes, 19.3 per cent from the middle classes and 7.6 per cent from the lower classes. However, these figures need to be complemented by the fact that figures for 22.7 per cent of the total cohort from 1994-94 were unavailable. The significance of this figure is that it means the percentage of those coming from the middle and lower classes is probably under-represented because these people are less likely to be mentioned in sources such as *Who's Who* from where many of the data were obtained. Finally, it might also be noted that 32.7 per cent of *directeurs* were children of civil servants, of which 5.6 per cent had a parent who was of a member of the *grands corps*, such as the Conseil d'État and the Inspection des Finances. The *grands corps* comprise the highest grades in the French administrative system.

Procedures for appointment and dismissal and some more statistics

In contrast to certain other countries the procedures for appointing and dismissing French departmental secretaries are politicised. This point is particularly true for *directeurs de cabinet* but it is only slightly less true for *directeurs d'administration centrale*.

i) *Directeurs de cabinet*

Directeurs de cabinet have close links with the administration. Many of them have a background in the administration and many of their activities are geared towards the administrative aspects of the department's work (see below). Moreover, it might also be noted that for the most part *cabinet* members are not paid out of the ministerial budget. If they are appointed

from within the administration, they continue to be paid according to their existing career grade and only receive a relatively small supplementary income on top. Thus, financially, too, many of them are closely linked with the administration. At the same time, though, *cabinet* members are highly politicised. The *cabinet* is not part of the permanent administration and the main task of *cabinet* members is to give the minister political as well as technical advice about policy matters.

Directeurs de cabinet are appointed by the minister and they can be dismissed by the minister at any time for any reason. Moreover, the minister has a completely free rein when making the appointment and can call upon people from inside or outside the administration. That said, it is not completely unheard of for the president and/or prime minister to insist that the minister appoint a particular person.[17] For example, in November 1999 when the Finance Minister, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, resigned in controversial circumstances, his *directeur de cabinet* stayed on to serve the new minister, Christian Sautter, thus signalling that there would be policy continuity. There seems little doubt that the prime minister actively supported this decision.[18] For the most part, though, ministers choose whom they want.

Because ministers usually have a free choice they tend to appoint people with whom they have previously worked, people whom they know they can trust, people whose loyalty is already guaranteed. In this sense, *directeurs de cabinet* are usually people who have demonstrated a certain technical expertise but who are also politically motivated. The fact that they are technically competent is reflected in their professional background. Most *directeurs de cabinet* have pursued a career in the higher civil service. Moreover, an overwhelming majority of these people have been to ENA or another *grande école*, while an almost equally overwhelming majority belong either to one of the *grands corps* or to the only slightly less prestigious *corps* of

administrateurs civils (see Table 1). At the same time, though, the fact that *directeurs de cabinet* are politically motivated is demonstrated by their relatively high level of political engagement. For example, in the Fabius government from 1984-86, 38.6 per cent of *directeurs* and *directeurs adjoints* had either stood for election, worked for a party, belonged to a political club, engaged in trades union activity or engaged in a similar type of political activity (Rouban 1997a: 25).

Table 1 here.

This mixture of technical competence and political experience is also reflected in where they go when they leave their post. A large percentage simply return the state sector, either to the administration or a public sector institution (see Table 2). However, the largest proportion go on to occupy another *cabinet* post. In this way, although the average tenure of *directeurs de cabinet* is around three years, many end up spending a considerable part of their career as senior ministerial advisors.

Table 2 here.

ii) *Directeurs d'administration centrale*

In some respects, the position of the *directeurs d'administration centrale* is slightly different from *directeurs de cabinet*. In theory *directeurs d'administration centrale* represent the apex of the administrative element of French departmental structure and the procedures governing their appointment and dismissal are codified in a set of formal rules. However, such is the nature of these rules that once again ministers are effectively free to choose whomsoever they want. In practice this means again that, while professional

competence is a basic prerequisite of the job, on occasions political considerations are not far from the surface when an appointment is being made.

Article 13 of the 1958 constitution states that the president has the right to make a certain number of civil and military appointments. It then goes on to state that *directeurs d'administration centrale* constitute one class of appointments that are made by way of a decree in the Council of Ministers. In addition, it says the president signs all the decrees agreed in the Council of Ministers. The president, therefore, would appear to be closely associated with the appointment of *directeurs*. However, this article should not be misunderstood. It does not mean that the president actually chooses who will be appointed. On the contrary, appointments are invariably proposed by the minister, usually following deliberations between the minister and the minister's *directeur de cabinet*, invariably after discussions with the prime minister's advisers and the president's advisers, and usually after consultation with people in the administration itself, notably those with responsibility for personnel matters.[19] However, the president's involvement is nevertheless potentially significant during periods of 'cohabitation', when the president and prime minister belong to opposing political parties. This is because, while in general terms power shifts to the prime minister during this time, there is also an unwritten rule that the president should be allowed to maintain a degree of influence over Article 13 appointments. For *directeurs d'administration*, *centrale* there is no substantive evidence to prove that presidents have systematically tried to foist political opponents on reluctant ministers during these periods. Instead, for the most part presidents have confined themselves to military and diplomatic matters, leaving appointments in the domain of domestic policy to the prime minister.[20] However, on occasions presidents have intervened in this domain too. For example, in 1998 President Chirac was able to use his powers to delay the

dismissal of one *directeur* in the Finance Ministry and to obtain the removal of another (Yolka 1999: 748).

Whatever the influence of the president, it is clear that nominally at least Article 13 places the appointment of *directeurs d'administration centrale* in the political domain. Moreover, Article 1 of a subsequent decree[21] states that *directeurs* are part of the set of appointments which "are left to the discretion of government in regard to both the nomination and cessation of their functions". In other words, like the appointment of *directeurs de cabinet*, the government has a completely free rein when it comes to appointing and dismissing *directeurs d'administration centrale*.[22] Again, this means that the government can appoint people from outside the public service if it so chooses. It also means that the government can dismiss a *directeur* at any time without having to provide a formal reason. The *directeur* has no way of challenging such a decision, except in the very unlikely instance where misconduct has been alleged. In this case, the *directeur* can invoke due process and contest the case. For the most part, though, in stark contrast to almost all other positions in the French administration where job security is still virtually guaranteed, *directeurs d'administration centrale* have no security of tenure whatsoever.

The formal statutes also distinguish between a 'function' and a career 'grade', or *corps* in the French public service.[23] The post of *directeur d'administration centrale* is deemed to be a functional employment. There is no separate *corps* of *directeur*. Thus, when an appointment is made from within the administration, as a large percentage are (see below), the person concerned is merely deemed to be on 'secondment' (*détachement*) from his or her normal career 'grade'. The corollary of this point is that when the *directeur*'s employment is terminated, he or she has the automatic right to return to the original *corps*. In this way, the threat of being sacked is somewhat tempered by the fact that in the event the *directeur* has a

guaranteed job to go back to. This is not to say, of course, that the person in question will actually want to go back to that job. It may be a retrograde career step. There may also be a financial disincentive to do so as *directeurs* are often entitled to a *prime*, or supplementary payment, which is not transferable. The result is that there may be pressure for the government to find suitable replacement positions for outgoing *directeurs* even when there is a clash of political loyalties. For example, during the first period of 'cohabitation' in 1986 a deal was struck between the president and newly elected prime minister such that the outgoing *Secrétaire général du gouvernement* was subsequently appointed as the head of a state-owned public utility company, Gaz de France, to compensate for his dismissal (Favier and Martin-Roland 1991: 504). It should be noted, though, that on occasions such posts are difficult to come across and departures sometimes end up being delayed until a suitable position is found.

These appointing procedures have two results (see Table 3). First, most appointments are made internally from within the administration on the basis of a demonstrated professional ability. For example, in 1984-85 only 8.3 per cent of all new appointments were made from outside the administrative sphere (Rouban 1996: 23). Moreover, internal appointments are regularly made from among members of the *grands corps* or the *administrateurs civils* (Rouban 1996: 29). Indeed, Rouban shows that from 1984-94 53.6 per cent of all *directeurs* belonged to one or other of these categories of civil servants (*ibid*.). Thus, like *directeurs de cabinet*, there is a distinct set of *directeurs d'administration centrale* who share a common professional background. Indeed, this is true generally, but it is particularly true with regard to specific ministries. *Directeurs* from certain *corps* often monopolise certain ministerial positions. For example, invariably the head of the *direction des routes* in the Transport Ministry will be someone who belongs to the technical *corps des ponts et chaussées*. Similarly, the *Secrétaire général du gouvernement* has tended

to be from the *Conseil d'État*. The fact that certain positions are to all intents and purposes reserved for people from particular administrative backgrounds means that there is often disquiet when this (albeit unwritten) rule is broken. Thus, when a *conseiller d'État* was appointed as the first non-historian or chartist [a former student of the École des Chartes in Paris] head of the *direction des Archives* for nearly 150 years, this naturally caused a stir within administrative circles. (See below). There was a fear that this decision would set a prcedent and that the Conseil d'État would be able to claim this position as its own in future years.

Table 3 here.

Second, whether the appointee comes from inside or outside the administration and whatever their professional background, there is also no doubt that political outlook is often one of the additional factors taken into account when an appointment is made. This is not to say that *directeurs* are overtly party political. On the contrary, in contrast to the figures for *directeurs de cabinet* (above) Rouban (1996) shows that between 1984-94 only 6.8 per cent of *directeurs d'administration centrale* had worked for the Socialist party compared with an even lower figure for the two main right-wing parties (1.4 per cent for the RPR and 0.5 per cent for the UDF). It is simply to say that, along with professional qualifications and task-competence, political sympathy has long been a key element that ministers have taken into consideration (Rouban 1996: p. 26). Indeed, Rouban goes so far as to argue that over time the level of politicisation has increased (ibid, p. 26).

In these ways, the French system exhibits some of the characteristics of a traditional spoils system. So, when there is an alternation in power there will usually be changes at the level of *directeur d'administration centrale*. For example, there is some evidence to suggest that in 1981 the newly-appointed

Communist ministers for Health, Transport and the Public Service were "particularly active" (Stevens 1985: 157) in replacing their *directeurs d'administration centrale* and that the same was also true for some Socialist ministries as well, such as Culture, Research, Justice, Education and Solidarity (Lochak 1985: 171). Indeed, in the last three months of 1981 and the first three months of 1982 a total of 46 per cent of all *directeurs* were changed and by May 1983, two years after the left had won power, 70 per cent of all *directeurs* had been replaced (Passeron 1987: 27).

However large these figures might be, and they are testimony to both the general politicisation of the service and the unusual nature of the 1981 alternation, it is also the case that in most instances the rhythm of change is relatively gradual. So, for example, in 1986 only 21 *directeurs* were replaced in the first three months of the new government (Rouban 1996: 21). The equivalent figures for 1988, 1993 and 1995 were 11, 14 and 17 respectively. However, in the period 1986-87 a total of 132 *directeurs* were replaced, in 1988-89 73 were changed, in 1993-94 89 were moved (Rouban 1996: 21.) and in 1995-96 70 were changed (Yolka 1999: 745).

Thus, when a new government comes to power there is a 'witch-hunt' of sorts, but it does not occur overnight. Moreover, many *directeurs* survive the arrival of a new government in power and stay on to serve their new political masters for a considerable period of time. For example, while Communist ministers may have been keen to change their *directeurs* in 1981, when they returned to government in 1997 they took great care not to politicise the appointments in their domain. Thus, in 1999 the Communist Transport Minister appointed a former gaullist *cabinet* member as the head of the *direction des routes*. Indeed, similar examples can be found throughout this Ministry in the period after 1997. All told, therefore, there is certainly a degree of politicisation in the appointment of *directeurs d'administration centrale*, but they do not constitute a party political class.

In terms of subsequent career trajectories, when *directeurs* leave their post they end up in a variety of different places (see Table 4). As noted above, many will simply go back to the *corps* from which they were originally appointed. They will return, for example, to the Conseil d'État and resume their role as the arbiters on matters of constitutional and administrative law. Some will be transferred to another administrative post either in the same department or in another part of the administration. A small number will retire. An equally small number will move directly into politics. For example, in 1991 the head of the president's advisory staff, Jean-Louis Bianco, was appointed as Minister for Social Affairs and in 1995 the head of the *direction des routes* in the Ministry for Public Amenities, Housing, Transport and Tourism was appointed as the junior minister for Transport in the newly elected Juppé government. Finally, a relatively large percentage will leave the central administration altogether. Many of these people were initially appointed from the private sector or the wider public sector in the first place. In this sense, they will simply return to their former home. However, civil servants are increasingly finding that they can pursue a lucrative career outside the administration and more and more are choosing to do so.

Table 4 here.

In conclusion, therefore, for some people appointment to the position of *directeur d'administration centrale* is part of a normal career progression. It is not unusual for *sous-directeurs* (the next organisational unit down in the ministerial hierarchy) and *directeurs-adjoint* (assistant directors) to be promoted in this way. However, few people actually end their career as a *directeur* and retire. Moreover, some people serve as a *directeur* on more than one occasion. Especially in the more technically oriented ministries, it is not unusual for people to be reappointed to the position after a period away from

the post.[24] For most, though, the post of *directeur* is a springboard to another more prestigious post in the administration, such as a senior post in the Conseil d'État, either immediately or at a somewhat later date perhaps when a more politically favourable government is back in office. Alternatively, it is part of a highly diversified career profile for those whose professional points of reference lie not just in the central administration itself but also in the private sector or the public sector more widely.

French departmental secretaries and their role[25]

The analysis suggests, therefore, that French departmental secretaries are drawn from a variety of professional backgrounds and that when they leave office they transfer to a variety of occupations. There are undoubtedly some commonalities between certain sets of *directeurs*, especially in terms of their social origins and professional training, and it seems reasonable to suggest that they constitute a politicised elite. However, apart from the indisputable fact that most *directeurs* are male, any attempt to construct a typical profile of a French departmental secretary is a risky business. That said, despite their different positions in the system both *directeurs d'administration centrale* and *directeurs de cabinet* share a professional experience. They carry out different tasks, but are both faced with common pressures. They both have an overview of the policy process, but only a limited one. They are both caught between pressures from above and below; and they are both at the interface of the political and administrative aspects of government. Each of these points will be considered in turn and each will discussed in relation, first, to *directeurs de cabinet* and, second, to *directeurs d'administration centrale*.

i) Departmental secretaries have an overview of the policy process, but only a limited one

For at least one writer, the *directeur de cabinet* is the "pivot of the ministry" (Thuillier 1982: 40). In this capacity, the *directeur* is seemingly well placed to coordinate the policy-making process. Firstly, all other things being equal within the *cabinet* the *directeur* is an authoritative figure. Chosen personally by the minister the *directeur* is the undisputed head of the minister's advisory team. From this position the *directeur* is obliged to maintain a general picture of the minister's work and will have to respond to the particular proposals that emanate from within the more policy-oriented elements of the *cabinet*. In so doing, the *directeur* will have to balance the tension between the political and the technical aspects of the *cabinet*'s work and will filter the information that the minister receives from the *cabinet* system as a whole. Secondly, the *directeur de cabinet* also has an important role to play in managing the work of the administration more generally. Either alone or in conjunction with the minister, the *directeur* will often have to arbitrate between the conflicting demands of the various *directeurs d'administration centrale* within the department. Again, this means that the *directeur de cabinet* will have to balance both political and internal departmental concerns. However, it also means that the *directeur de cabinet* is uniquely placed within the ministry in that he or she has an overview of both the department's work and the minister's career.

That said, many *directeurs de cabinet* only have a limited overview of the departmental decision-making process. This is for two reasons. Firstly, it is relatively common for ministers to appoint special advisers outside the normal hierarchy of the *cabinet* system (such as a *chargé de mission auprès du ministre*). These people may report directly to the minister concerning a particular aspect of the department's work. So, there is the opportunity for conflict between the special adviser and the *directeur de cabinet*. The former does not necessarily control the latter. Moreover, it is equally common for ministers to appoint unofficial advisers. These people may be concerned with

a specific policy issue. Just as often, though, they will assume the role of general political advisers. In this way, the pivotal position of the *directeur de cabinet* may again be challenged. Indeed, this may be the minister's aim. Some ministers are more comfortable receiving a variety of recommendations from which they can then choose. Secondly, for the department generally, the *directeur de cabinet* may have to deal with junior ministers and their *directeurs de cabinet*. Although a senior minister will have greater authority than any junior minister and although ministers may share personal advisers to facilitate coordination problems, there is still the risk that the management aspect of the *directeur de cabinet*'s work will be more difficult. Here, specific aspects of the department's work may be overseen by the junior minister's *cabinet*, the *directeur* of which may report directly to the senior minister as well. All told, therefore, a *directeur de cabinet* is uniquely placed, but the position is not necessarily an uncontested one.

A similar point applies to the *directeurs d'administration centrale*. They too have a great deal of authority in their own organisation. Like the *directeurs de cabinet*, they have the legitimacy of having been appointed to the post by the minister. Moreover, the appointee will also usually belong to a higher civil service grade, or *corps*, than most of the other people in the *direction*. Thus, politically and professionally the *directeur* will be well placed to oversee the *direction*. In addition, the structure of the *direction* strengthens the coordination function of the *directeur* personally. A *direction* will be split into a number of *sous-directions* (each headed by a *sous-directeur*), which in turn are then split into *bureaux* (each headed by a *chef de bureau*). Thus, not only are French departments fragmented internally, but *directions* are too. Thus, the *directeur* is strategically placed to exercise control over the various elements of his or her *direction*. The *directeur* will have to arbitrate between the demands of the various *sous-directions* and will be expected to exercise leadership functions for the *direction* as a whole.

Again, as with *directeurs de cabinet*, *directeurs d'administration centrale* only have a limited overview of the policy-making process for two reasons. Firstly, each *directeur* only has responsibility for a particular policy remit. There are, of course, great variations between *directions* in this respect. Some, such as the *direction du Budget* and the *direction du Trésor* within the Finance Ministry, are long-standing and prestigious institutions whose policy affect is wide-ranging. However, others, such as perhaps the *direction de l'eau* in the Ministry for Development and the Environment, may or may not be as long-standing, but their policy affect will certainly be less great. Whatever its range, therefore, a *direction* will only be one of the basic organisational units within the department and in terms of overall policy planning the *directeur*'s overview will necessarily be restricted. Indeed, in the case of some of the smaller *directions* mentioned above, it may be highly restricted. Secondly, even though most *directions* are organised vertically (see above) and although their policy remit will be set out in an official decree, there is bound to be the potential for overlap between different *directions*. Indeed, Suleiman (1974: 213) goes so far as to say that "[t]here is scarcely a question that can be settled within a single direction or in a single ministry …". The result, though, is that any given *directeur* is likely to find that a closely related issue is being addressed by another *direction*.[26] This overlap generates an in-built, institutional propensity for 'turf wars' within the French system. At the same time, it also makes the coordination process more difficult as a *directeur* may feel that he or she is not in a position to manage every aspect of a particular policy matter.

ii) Departmental secretaries are caught between pressures from above and below

Directeurs de cabinet may occupy a pivotal position in the ministry but this position is undoubtedly a strategically difficult one. Their main point of reference is the minister. The minister will have certain expectations about what the *directeur* should be doing and these expectations are likely to be highly inflated. At the same time, the *directeur* must be equally sensitive to both the other members of the minister's *cabinet* and the representatives of the central administrative services in the department more generally. They too will have highly inflated expectations about what the *directeur* can achieve for them. The result is that any *directeur* will be a highly "contested' (Thuillier 1982: 41) figure.

Most ministers do not wish to intervene in the day-to-day working of either the *cabinet* or the central administration generally. Instead, they expect the *directeur de cabinet* to perform these basic managerial functions. At the same time ministers also expect *directeurs* to concentrate on the key aspects of policy making. They count on the *directeur* to be able to present them with clear policy choices in which the advantages and disadvantages of rival options are outlined. Moreover, ministers expect their *directeur* to be concerned with the political consequences of such options. When the subsequent recommendation is discussed with the prime minister's and/or president's advisers, these consequences will play a fundamental role in the final decision on whether the policy should be adopted. And yet, many of the subordinate members of the minister's *cabinet* as well as most of the representatives of the central administration will promote sometimes highly technical policy concerns. These people expect political considerations to play a role in the final decisions. They do hope, however, that there will still be room for specific reforms to be adopted. Needless to say, there is often a tension between these considerations. The minister, in conjunction with the prime minister and/or president, has the ultimate authority, but it is a courageous, or perhaps foolhardy, minister who would always place political

considerations above technical ones and in so doing would risk alienating the central administration in the department. The *directeur de cabinet* is the person who is at the interface between these conflicting demands.

All told, therefore, a *directeur de cabinet* must be both managerially adept and politically aware. The *directeur* must be sensitive to the *cabinet* and to the central administration. However, he or she must also know the minister's mind and just as importantly the minister's temperament. The result, though, is that: "[c]ontrary to popular belief a *directeur de cabinet* cannot do everything: nothing is simple and his room for manoeuvre is strictly limited, however astute he might be" (Thuillier 1979: 12).

In some respects, the *directeurs d'administration centrale* are in a similar position. They are caught between the demands and expectations of the minister and the *cabinet*, on the one hand, and the members of the *direction*, on the other. More particularly, ministers have a tendency to see *directeurs* as the spokespersons for the administration, whereas members of the *direction* often see the *directeur* as a political figure who is simply carrying out the minister's sometimes patently irrational orders. Moreover, there is a further tension in that *directeurs* often see *cabinet* members as attempting to usurp their position, while *cabinet* members may accuse *directeurs* of making their job difficult. As one writer puts it, *directeurs* are "caught between the complaints of the subordinate and suspicion of the cabinet" (Thuillier 1979: 41).

There is no doubt a minister needs *directeurs* to promote policies and to suggest reforms. And yet the minister is also bound to be suspicious of such reforms. The annual budgetary process is a case in point. Here, ministers will want to maximise their budget and they will need their services to come up with expenditure proposals. All the same, inevitably the proposals will exceed the department's budgetary limit and so the minister will have to arbitrate between the conflicting demands. In this case, the role of the *directeur* will be to promote the initiatives from his or her own *direction*. In so

doing, however, the *directeur* quickly appears as the spokesperson for certain entrenched interests, perhaps making it easier for the minister to fall back on political motivations when he or she is called upon to make an arbitration. By the same token, however, *directeurs* who are either unwilling or unable to face down the minister and who lose out in the arbitration process will just as inevitably be viewed with suspicion by the services within the *direction*. The unsuccessful *directeur* may be viewed as someone who does not have the interests of the *direction* at heart or who is simply not up to the task. Thus, the *directeur* is delicately placed. He or she must stand up to the minister without alienating him or her. At the same time the *directeur* must also faithfully represent the *direction* so as to maintain a degree of loyalty and collegiality.

A further tension emerges between the *directeur* and the *cabinet*. There is long-standing evidence to suggest that *directeurs* resent what they see as the interventionism of the minister's *cabinet*. So, Suleiman (1974: 205) reports that 79.0 per cent of *directeurs* believed that *cabinet* members tried to 'short-circuit' the administration, meaning that they would by-pass the *directeur* and deal directly with other members of the central administration. Similarly, 60.5 per cent of *directeurs* (ibid: 206) thought that the *cabinet* acted as a screen between them and the minister, implying that they were blocking off access to the minister. Equally, though, there is likely to be resentment on the part of the *cabinet* towards the *directeur*. As before, the politically oriented aspect of the *cabinet* may simply see the *directeur* as a spokesperson for the *direction*'s special interests. Alternatively, the disagreement may be more technical. The specialist element of the *cabinet* may object to the specifics of the reform proposal generated by the *direction*'s services which the *directeur* is defending. In these cases, too, the minister may be called upon to arbitrate, meaning that old tensions may surface once again.

In these ways, then, the *directeurs d'administration centrale* are just as precariously placed as *directeurs de cabinet*. They are often appointed with the

backing of the minister and they are undoubtedly the most senior element of the central administration. However, this position simply means that they often end up being seen as too politicised by the administrators and too bureaucratised by the politicians.

iii) Departmental secretaries are at the interface of the political and administrative aspects of government

The final point underpins the previous two. The essential dilemma of French departmental secretaries is that they occupy the position where the political and administrative aspects of government overlap. Certainly, this dilemma affects *directeurs de cabinet* and *directeurs d'administration centrale* in slightly different ways, but it is still sufficient to provide them with a shared professional experience.

Directeurs de cabinet occupy an unequivocally politicised element of the politico-administrative structure, but at the same time they cannot simply be divorced from the administration. For example, one writer portrays the position of the *directeur de cabinet* in the following terms: "he is in a certain way the source of administrative *legitimacy*, being the highest placed person in the hierarchy below the minister, who plays a strictly political role: he is an essential component of administrative power" (Thuillier 1982: 50).[27] Thus, whatever the tensions and suspicions that exist between them, there is a certain sense in which the members of the central administration, including the *directeurs d'administration*, consider *directeurs de cabinet* to be one of their own. Indeed, this structural link is reinforced by the sociological ties that bind a fair proportion of these people together (see above). After all, *directeurs de cabinet* are often drawn from the *grands corps*, frequently they have had personal experience of the administration and more often than not they have undertaken their professional training in the same schools as many of their

more senior counterparts within the administration. For the administration, therefore, invariably they are 'one of us'. And yet, for the same people *directeurs de cabinet* are also 'one of them'. As the minister's closest representative, *directeurs de cabinet* will sometimes have to be willing to forego rationality for the sake of expediency. In this way, they will have to go against one of the most fundamental principles that underpins the French administrative culture. Moreover, the fact that *directeurs de cabinet* will often have to put politics first not only pits *directeurs de cabinet* against administrators, it also pits *directeurs* against themselves. For those who were brought up as administrators, they will have to be prepared to go against the basic principles of their own training. This can make policy advice a difficult job to carry out at a personal as well as at a professional level.

In contrast to *directeurs de cabinet*, *directeurs d'administration centrale* occupy an ostensibly administrative element of the politico-administrative structure, but they too end up being immersed in the political aspects of the policy-making process. So, there is no doubt that most *directeurs d'administration centrale* exude professional competence; many of them are drawn from the *grands corps*, the most prestigious institutions with the administration. Moreover, as administrative initiatives come up through the chain of command in the *direction*, there is also no doubt that *directeurs* serve as the primary spokespersons for these initiatives when they are discussed with the minister and the minister's *cabinet*. At the same time, *directeurs* are also obliged to implement policy decisions made by the minister down through the self-same chain of command. Thus, inevitably they will have to use their authority to impose unpopular decisions on subordinate services. Moreover, as they are sometimes political, or at least politicised, appointees, when they do so their motives are likely to be viewed with suspicion by those in the *direction* whom the decisions affect. All told, as with *directeurs de cabinet*,

directeurs d'administration centrale sometimes find their job a difficult one to carry out both in relation to others and to themselves.

Personal accounts

The aim of this section is to provide two personal reflections on the more general aspects of the role of French departmental secretaries. These accounts are not representative nor are they meant to be. It is not claimed that they constitute a cross-section of all departmental secretaries in France since 1970. M. Gaeremynck and M. Belaval are not necessarily typical of the whole set of *directeurs d'administration centrale*. Instead, they have been chosen because what they have to say is suggestive. It is indicative of the various ways in which departmental secretaries understand their role and how they experience it from a personal point of view.

As will become clear, M. Gaeremynck and M. Belaval have many things in common. They are almost the same age; they have had a similar professional training; and clearly they occupy equivalent positions within the administrative structure. Indeed, more than that, they are not just colleagues but also friends. That said, as will also become clear, while they share a similar perspective about many of the different aspects of the French administrative system, there are also a number of differences between them: differences of perspective, differences of appreciation and differences of judgement. The fact that *directeurs* share many things in common, but that there are also a great many differences between even the most seemingly similar of them is the main argument of this paper.

i) Jean Gaeremynck, *Directeur de la Population et des Migrations*, Ministry of Employment

Jean Gaeremynck was born on 7 March 1954. After initially thinking of going to the École Normale Supérieure and training to be a teacher, he quickly decided to go to the Institut des Sciences Politiques in Paris (Sciences Po) and then passed the entrance exam to ENA. He graduated from ENA in 1980 (*promotion* Voltaire), was classed well and chose to enter the Conseil d'État. After five years in the Conseil d'État he then took the rather unusual step, in the present-day context at least, of going to Africa, serving as an adviser to the President of Senegal for four years. He returned to the Conseil d'État in 1989 and a year later was appointed to the *cabinet* of the Minister for Justice, Pierre Méhaignerie, who was a member of the right-wing coalition. When the Minister left office in 1995, M. Gaeremynck returned to the Conseil d'État. He was subsequently appointed to the post of *directeur d'administration centrale* on 27 March 1997, again under a right-wing government, but maintained this post when the left took power just a couple of months later. At the time of the interview he had been in office for exactly three years.

M. Gaeremynck first thought about becoming a civil servant very early on: "During the course of my secondary education, I think. Around the age of 13-14. Something like that". His background was clearly state-centred and he told the following story: "Listen, when I entered the sixth class, … I was 10 years old, the first day at school the teacher put a portrait of General de Gaulle above his desk. [Laughter] No, it's just to give you an idea of my background. I'm 46 years old. I was born in 1954. The background in which I grew up when I was little — and even in the whole of the environment in which I was brought up, school, family, etc. — it wasn't a cult, it's not the way my family is, but let's say that there was an extremely positive appreciation of the General's role in restoring France, the State etc.. I grew up in this sort of environment. So, for me, I think that [the role of the administration] was placed very highly because of all this".

Against this background, M. Gaeremynck followed a classic career path, going first to Sciences Po and then to ENA. Asked about his time at both places he recounted: "They are two quite different institutions. Sciences Po is really an intellectual awakening because you take a wide variety of subjects and in addition the education is very good both in terms of university teaching and also in terms of action because many of the lecturers are practitioners … practitioners from the administration. For example, currently I take a seminar at Sciences Po. I'm teaching there. But on the other hand you also have some very very good specialists, lecturers, researchers. It's this mixture of the two that makes Sciences Po such an interesting place. So, I have a very fond memory of Sciences Po, even if preparing for the [ENA] exam was more utilitarian and less interesting … less exciting, but basically the teaching was very rich. It's a place where you meet people, a place where you mix. A sort of 'melting-pot' [said in English]. There you have it. ENA was completely different … You've already become part of the public service. At ENA you are already a civil servant. You've already been recruited. The aim of the School is obviously to teach you something, but you work towards the final grade so that you can then have a choice [of where to go]. I don't have a bad memory of ENA … because what I liked was really the applied teaching. At ENA that's really it. I mean, the work-placement period, the applied seminars. You analyse a problem not for the sake of scientific advancement, but so as to end up with propositions and I liked that. … It depends also a little bit on the environment, the people you work with, the people giving the seminars that you can go to. In this respect, for me, it was good. And I didn't really mind the competitive side of things which is really there at ENA. But that also really depends on the year, the ambience, the friends that you make. It's really very variable …".

Although in a number respects M. Gaeremynck's subsequent career path was highly typical, his appointment as a *directeur d'administration centrale*

was slightly unusual in that he was groomed for the job prior to his official appointment. Describing his career, he said: "I went back to the Conseil d'Etat [in 1995]. And then I was asked — having made it known that I had an interest in social affairs, in [refugee and immigrant] integration issues on which I had already worked — I was put in line for the job here. I was asked to write a report". He was then immediately questioned as to whether his appointment had come as a surprise, to which he replied: "A great surprise, no. Because as I just said a few months beforehand I was sort of put in line for the job, asked to write a report … Given my background, I was the age when normally you take up this sort of position, but well becoming a *directeur* is never automatic. It's never anyone's right. It's a point in a career when you take up a "very important" post in inverted commas shall we say, or at least relatively speaking, in terms of the French administrative structures, it's a very important post. So, obviously I was very happy. I can't say that it came out the blue, like that, because I was prepared for it, if you like. But, I was very pleased". When pressed on this point, he went on to say: "[The *cabinet*] asked me if I wouldn't mind doing a report for them on the relaunch of integration policy, which I did, which I did a few months before [my appointment]. So, I made a few contacts, did some reading, wrote the report. And following the report there was a series of administrative meetings which were designed to determine the programme which would relaunch the integration policy, which the Minister wanted to determine and lead, and so I was part of that. So, I can tell you that about six months before I was actually appointed I was already part of the system, if you like".

Regarding the nature of the policy process, M. Gaeremynck stated: "What is a policy? A policy is a discourse, a political direction, a political will set out by the Minister and then the action programme behind it … Well, we, I, participate all the time with the *cabinet* in determining the Minister's political direction and when it comes to action plans we are always defining

them, enriching them, adjusting them. But I think that really my role is to propose things. I think that it is my job all the time to put forward propositions to the *cabinet* so as to meet a certain objective, to react to an unexpected event, to adjust an action plan that has been agreed but that needs to be adjusted during the implementation process. You see."

In terms of his policy impact, the *directeur* had a particular notion of his role, which he stressed on a number of occasions. For example, at one point he stated: "I believe that I have the power to propose. And, the ideal thing, I find, is to be given an instruction that you've formulated yourself. I think that's ideal. In any case, there's a constant exchange with the *cabinet*. We talk. When it comes to a proposal, it's yes for this, yes for that, or no for that … The work is a sort of permanent iteration. By contrast, this power to propose … when it comes to my colleagues [within the *direction*] is independent, or almost independent, of the hierarchical structure. That's to say, if there is someone who's not very high up in a *bureau*, who is not even a *chef de bureau*, for example, he can still have a very good idea … I ask the *sous-directeurs*, the *chefs de bureau* to make sure that everyone can contribute so that if there's a good idea around somewhere we can grab it and I make sure that it is presented to the *cabinet*. Do you understand?".

In this context, M. Gaeremynck also insisted that he had the power to influence policy decisions: "Listen. A *directeur* is appointed to a position which usually gives him an enormous power to influence things. I don't like the term 'power' on its own because I don't think it means very much. By contrast, I like the term 'power to influence'. A *directeur* is an influential man, or an influential person. What is an influential person? Well, first of all, he influences policies in the sense that if he's permanently putting forward proposals, then he ends up by adding to the minister's policy. On the other hand he's at the point in the system where the information system and system which gives out instructions, which determines the programme,

converge. As such, usually he usually has an enormous influence over his administration. Usually. It depends also on the size of the *direction*. But, you know, he is an influential person. He is in a unique position. Unique".

Another aspect of the interview was the emphasis the *directeur* placed on the network of contacts he had established through his membership of the Conseil d'État. "When it comes to *directeurs*, we all know each other, just about, in the Conseil d'État. In addition, when you have this type of job, it corresponds to a logical type of administrative career path. So, you're the same sort of age, do you see? You know everyone else. It's the way things are. I don't know the youngest of my colleagues very well, but they're not *directeurs*. They're not at the controls, if I can put it like that. By contrast, those who are at the controls, whether they are *directeurs d'administration centrale*, or those who are in ministerial *cabinets*, or the Prime Minister's *cabinet*, we know each other. I know them all. It's a great network. I won't say that it fixes things … but, you know, the fact that we know each other, it makes things easier. Earlier, we were talking about the Ministry of the Interior, the *directeur des libertés publiques et des affaires juridiques*, well he's a former colleague from the Conseil d'État who joined the Conseil a year before me. We've known each other for a long time. Well, we've both got some delicate and difficult issues to deal with. Our colleagues see each other and sometimes things get blocked completely. I'll give Jean-Marie a ring, we'll see each other, have lunch. Well, it's not automatic. We manage to resolve the problem by talking to each other face to face. It's not automatic. Sometimes it's so much a question of the ministerial line, the traditional ministerial line, that we don't manage to sort things out. But, well, it's quite unusual for us not to find a solution". Asked why it was usually possible to find a solution he replied: "It's a function of belonging to the same *corps*. The *esprit de corps* is so strong in the French system … There aren't very many of us in the Conseil d'État. About 300 all told. So, the *esprit de corps* is very strong. Another thing which is

unique to the Conseil d'État is that when you are inside it the jobs are distributed in such a way that you are not in competition with anyone else or scarcely so. So, the mood inside the Conseil d'État is really good … The rivalry is at ENA".

Finally, M. Gaeremynck was asked whether the administration had changed in recent times. "Well, in terms of its organisation, not really … The way in which the system is organised into *directions* and even the internal structure of *directions*, the relations with the *cabinet* etc., I think that it hasn't really, really changed. By contrast, what's in the process of changing a lot is the way of working, the administrative way of working. Because, it's true, we are modernising the method. We are using the new technologies, internet, intranet etc., paging … We're also trying to develop a more horizontal way of working. That's to say, for example, linking an action plan with a project. Leading the project is a project manager who has a predetermined mission, a team. Things like that. It allows a vertical logic, which is traditionally the logic of the administration, to coexist with a horizontal logic …".

2. Philippe Belaval, *Directeur des Archives de France*, Ministry of Culture and Communication

Philippe Belaval was born on 21 August 1955 in Toulouse. He obtained a Masters in law and studied at the Institut d'Études Politiques in Toulouse. He took the entrance exam to ENA and passed it. At the end of his time there he was classed very well and chose to enter the Conseil d'État. After four years in the Conseil d'État he entered the *cabinet* of the Socialist Budget Minister, Henri Emmanuelli, in 1983. After briefly returning to the Conseil d'État when the right won power in 1986, he was then appointed as the *directeur adjoint* in the *cabinet* of the Public Service Minister, Michel Durafour, when the left returned to power in 1988 and was subsequently appointed as Durafour's

directeur de cabinet in 1990. Later that year he took up the post of the manager of the Opéra de Paris. After another brief spell in the Conseil d'État from 1992-94, he was then appointed as the head of *Bibliothèque nationale* where he was in post for four years. Finally, he was appointed as the *directeur des archives de France* in the Ministry of Culture and Communication in July 1998 by the Socialist Minister, Catherine Trautmann.

M. Belaval first thought about joining the higher civil service much later than M. Gaeremynck. "I was studying law and political science and, well, I didn't have a very clear idea of what I wanted to do. My parents saw me perhaps as a lawyer, or something like that. Then, there was the exam, the entrance exam to ENA. I wasn't really sure whether I was good enough. And then, as a result of circumstances, friends, teachers, I took the exam and passed it. So, I ended up as a higher civil servant more by chance than by vocation or choice". When asked about his impression of the French administration before he entered ENA, he replied in a similar way: "I had no concrete idea of what the administration was. I took the ENA exam with a really vague idea of what it did, what sort of careers you were being trained to do … I'm a bad choice [of someone to interview] in this respect because, if you like, firstly, I don't come from a civil service family, so it would be wrong to say that I did it out of atavism or a desire to follow in the family footsteps. I'd even say that, well, my father was a businessman and he had an anti-bureaucratic culture, at least he didn't particularly like civil servants. So, it's certainly not because my family influenced me that I did it. And also it's not, how should I say, out of a sense of vocation, of being part of the public service. It's really just circumstances that account for it. And it's only afterwards that I realised that it suited me very well, that it corresponded to my tastes and to things I believed in".

In terms of his professional training, M. Belaval also had a slightly different impression of ENA than M. Gaeremynck, although their attitude to

their respective Instituts d'Études Politiques is similar. He stated: "With regard to Sciences Po I remember that it was a difficult time. It was hard work, because you had to work, work, work so that you could pass the exam. The years passed relatively quickly, but relatively austerely. I'd just qualify that by saying that the last few months, the time when I was preparing for the exam, were quite stimulating intellectually speaking. Because in preparing for the exam as it was then you were forced to study a lot of subjects, to be up to date with current affairs, which resulted in a feeling of intellectual fulfilment that I haven't experienced since. And definitely not at ENA, where, apart from the work-placement period, I remember the teaching as being very unrewarding, very unpleasant in a environment that wasn't really very nice with very few acquaintances, very few friendships. And, in addition the content of the teaching wasn't very interesting at all, apart from the modern languages side of things, the sport, things like that. So, overall the memory of my time at ENA is a much more gloomy, much more negative one than the memory of my time at Sciences Po …". When pressed as to why he had a very different reaction to the two institutions, he replied: "There's no real value-added [at ENA after Sciences Po]. A big difference is that there aren't really any lectures at ENA, but there are things which are supposed to be preparing you for administrative life. But quickly it becomes a bit artificial because the only real preparation is actually doing it. Pretending to be a higher civil servant is a bit, well, a bit ridiculous. So, in intellectual terms it was pretty weak and the mood in my year, well it depends from one year to the next, but mine, well, it wasn't the worst, but still it wasn't very nice. And then it's true the final grading makes you very anxious because you hear that so many things depend on it. So, all that means that even 20 years later I have quite a negative feeling about it".

In further contrast to M. Gaeremynck, M. Belaval's subsequent appointment as a *directeur* came out of the blue. He recounted the following

story: "I had no idea at all that I was going to be offered the post of *directeur* … I think that I was appointed because traditionally the *directeur* of the Archives was either a chartist or an historian. It had never been an *énarque*. But, my predecessor was up against a certain number of problems as a result of which he resigned in a fairly spectacular way in June 1998. Well, his resignation shed a bit of light on the difficulties of the institution. The government decided that to put these difficulties right, which were difficulties related to relations with the other administrative services etc., it needed someone who knew the administration a bit better, who knew the state machine a bit better than historians and chartists. So, naturally they thought of someone in the Conseil d'État and, as it was known that I wanted to leave the Bibliothèque nationale, I was asked. It was a complete surprise. I wasn't expecting it at all". Again, when pressed on this matter, he elaborated further. He said: "It began with a phone call. It was a Friday. I was told, well, there you are, we're thinking of you. What do you think about it? I said that I would think about it and call back on Monday. On Monday, I said that we should meet because, yes, I might be interested. And by Wednesday it was all agreed. But, you know, a *direction* is a *direction*. It's duties are set out. It's not at all like in the private sector where you might be able to negotiate. I wasn't going to say I'll take that, but not that. So, it's all or nothing. I did indeed have conversations about what the policy was going to be, what the strategy was etc., but that's all".

Whatever the differences between M. Gaeremynck and M. Belaval, the impression gained from the interviews was that they had a relatively similar idea of their role and the extent to which they were able to influence the decision-making process. "What you have is an organisation that's very old, long-lasting. There are a lot of people who were here before me and who will be here after me. So, it's difficult to leave a mark. But, well, you work at it … I'm convinced that the time when you could command the administration in

the way that Frederick the Great commanded the army has gone. Consequently, you have to try to get the best result through dialogue, participation and by creating a team, a community. What I'm trying to do is to create an atmosphere around me where people feel good and are motivated by the same aims and objectives that I have myself. I believe that when people are happy with what they're doing, then they're excellent". Furthermore, when asked whether he was a manager or a leader, he replied: "Both. It's often a coordinating role in the sense that it's sometimes difficult, although it might appear surprising in such a small *direction*, to get people to work together. So, I have to make sure that people have been consulted, that they have had their say etc. It's also a leadership role because very often I'll say, what if we did this or that etc.". All told, it is highly likely that any one of his colleagues would have endorsed this view of the role of a *directeur*.

Equally, when asked about the power of technocrats in the system and the importance of the contacts that he had established, M. Belaval's appreciation was very similar to the one provided by M. Gaeremynck and yet his tone was still noticeably different in some respects. When asked about whether he benefited from the contacts that he had made, he replied: "Yes, of course, it helps. It helps. But I mean, if [a colleague] wasn't a member of the Conseil d'État, I'd still ring him to sort out the problem … I was really very struck when I was appointed here. My appointment didn't go unnoticed because I was the first non-chartist since 1850-something and the first non-historian ever appointed. So, people said, there you are, another conquest for the Conseil d'État, another conquest for the *énarchie* … But nobody ever said to me, here you are, here's the *énarchie* flag or the Conseil d'État flag go and raise it there. It so happens that I'm here, it's true, but, I mean, when I leave I'm not sure that it will help the person who comes after me … At the risk of appearing naive, perhaps I'm really out of the loop, perhaps I'm wrong, but

there's no sort of organised lobby, or secret law which is imparted to people …".

Finally, in contrast to M. Gaeremynck, M. Belaval suggested that there was only a limited degree of horizontal coordination in his department. "Traditionally the Culture Ministry is organised very vertically in the way it sees things. So, in our area, there's not a lot of synergy, there's not a lot of coming together. And, moreover, in reality this situation is worsened by the fact that we're located some way away from the others … in an area which traditionally is not an administrative one. So, this doesn't help contacts and dialogue. I think that the Ministry is not horizontal enough. I don't have frequent enough contacts with my colleagues about policy matters."

Conclusion

There are certain well established academic traditions in the study of the French administration.[28] There is, for example, a long-standing argument that the French higher civil sevice form part of a socially unrepresentative power-block (Birnbaum *et al* 1978). According to one version of this argument, the policy preferences of senior public servants simply reflect the highly privileged nature of their particular social background. By contrast, another well-known account emphasises the fact that many senior civil servants have undergone a specific form of educational and professional training and suggests that France is a technocracy (Meynaud 1968), meaning that policy making is dominated by a group of people who try to resolve social dilemmas by reference to technical solutions. A final argument is based on the observation that the administration has become increasingly politicised and that incoming governments have used their powers to place politically supportive people in the main posts in the administration (Dagnaud and Mehl 1982).

The logic of this chapter is that the above arguments, and those like them, are misleading. At any one point in time in France there are a great many departmental secretaries who are living a wide variety of personal experiences. Moreover, the variety of experiences is only likely to increase in the years to come as the pressures to modernise and diversify the central administration increase. This is not to say that there is nothing that links these people together now. Nor is it to say that there will not continue to be links between them in the future. On the contrary, substantial percentages of departmental secretaries are drawn from relatively similar social backgrounds, have undergone the same sort of professional training and have been appointed to more or less politicised positions. These are indeed the basic generalisations that can be made about French departmental secretaries. However, to acknowledge these links does not mean that it is possible simply to read off the preferences of this set of higher civil servants by reference solely to their social, professional or party political backgrounds. Even those departmental secretaries who are drawn from the same background, who have been through the same training procedure and who have been appointed to relatively similar posts are still likely to make sense of their previous experiences in a variety of different ways and to have a different judgement about their current and future role. In short, while it is possible to generalise about the French higher civil service, it is important not to over-generalise; while it is necessary to identify the aspects which are common to this set of highly influential decision-makers, it is also necessary to appreciate the specific ways in which individuals construct their own personal reality that they then apply to the world around them.

Notes

[1] There were 25 governments in its 12 year history.

[2] Article 21 also states that the prime minister is responsible for national defence. This clause, though, is respected more in the breach than in the observance.

[3] For an overview of the different academic interpretations of the French state, see Elgie and Griggs (2000: chap. 1).

[4] It should be noted that the 'plural' left government, which includes representatives from the Communist party, has also approved a number of privatisation proposals since coming to power in 1997.

[5] There is, however, some variation between Ministries. For example, the Ministry of Equipment has experimented with departmental directorates which have given *directeurs d'administration centrale* a greater degree of flexibility with regard, for example, to pay levels. (Information from personal interviews, see also Trosa 1995: 59-61).

[6] The example of the *direction des routes* (roads divisions) in the Ministry of Transport is a case in point. (Information from perosnal interviews).

[7] In her Siwek-Pouydesseau (1969) also compared these two institutions.

[8] In fact, similar structures can also be headed by people who hold such titles as *délégué*, *délégué général*, *haut-commissaire* and *commissaire* as well (de Baecque and Quermonne 1983: p. 151).

[9] The Employment Ministry maintained the old system until 1960; there was a *secrétariat général* in the Post and Telecommunications Ministry until 1970; and in 1963 the Education Ministry reverted back to the old *secrétariat général* structure only for the experiment to be abandoned six years later (de Baecque 1973: 202).

[10] Indeed, it it might be noted that for one writer at least *directeurs de cabinet* are considered to be the true equivalent of the British permanent secretary (Quermonne 1991: 64).

[11] It must be assumed that the figure on p. 135 of this work is a misprint.

[12] This figure includes those who may have served as a *directeur de cabinet* on more than one occasion during this period.

[13] In addition to the statistical evidence, the following sections are also partly based on interviews with a number of *directeurs d'administration centrale*. These interviews took place in March 2000. The author would like to thank the *directeurs* concerned for sparing some of their very valuable time.

[14] See, for example, Birnbaum (1982) and Meynaud (1968).

[15] The author would like to thank Prof. Rouban for the use of this material. The figures cited in the rest of this section are all taken directly from Siwek-Pouydesseau (1969) and Rouban (1996).

[16] It might be noted that from 1984-96 9 per cent of *directeurs de cabinet* were women. In fact, this marks an increase over earlier periods, where, for example, from 1958-72 there were no female *directeurs de cabinet* at all (Rouban 1997a: 23).

[17] This is perhaps the implication in Thuillier (1982: 40).

[18] See *Le Monde*, 4 November, 1999.

[19] See Rouban (1999: 69).

[20] One writer notes that after 1997, President Chirac had no alternative but to accept the appointment of new *directeurs* in the Education, Finance and Interior Ministries (Yolka 1999: 747-48).

[21] Decree no. 59-442, 21 March 1959.

[22] The only conditions are the ones that apply to all civil servants, namely that they must be French, that they must possess all their civic rights, that there must be no irregularity with regard to their national service and that they must physically capable of carrying out the functions associated with their job.

[23] The term '*corps*' refers to a group of officials who enjoy the same conditions of service and who carry out the same tasks within the administration. Consequently, every civil servant is a member of a *corps* and there are over 1,300 different *corps* within the French administration. However, as noted in the text, there is no *corps* of *directeurs d'administration centrale*. This is why appointees are deemed to be on secondment from their original *corps* or grade.

[24] In Rouban's (1996) study, 32 of the 555 people who were appointed as a *directeur* from 1984-94 left office and were then reappointed at some stage during this same period.

[25] Although somewhat outdated, still one of the best studies of the relationship between ministers, *cabinets* and *directeurs* can be found in Suleiman (1974: esp. 137-238).

[26] In the French system, power to reorganise the ministry lies with the minister personally. Thus, incoming ministers often take the opportunity to shift responsibilities from one *direction* to another, to amalgamate *directions* or even to abolish them altogether.

[27] Emphasis in the original.

[28] For an overview, see Elgie and Griggs (2000: chap. 3).

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Table 1

The civil service background of *directeurs de cabinet* 1984-94 (per cent)

Administrateurs civils	24.8
Administrative *grands corps*	44.2
Technical *grands corps*	8.0
Teachers	4.1
Contract workers	2.4
Have been to ENA	64.8
Have been to the X	4.6

Source: Rouban (1997a: 23)

Table 2

Immediate career trajectory of *directeurs d'administration centrale* and *directeurs adjoints* 1984-94 (per cent)

Administrative position	13.3
Managerial posts (*directeurs*)	9.0
Abroad	4.5
Grands corps	11.0
Public sector organisation (*établissement public*)	7.7
Public sector company (*entreprise public*)	4.5
Local government	2.1
Politics	1.7
Private sector	6.4

Cabinet	36.8
Other	0.6
Not known	2.6

Source: Rouban (1997a: 27)

Table 3

Institutional origins of *directeurs d'administration centrale* 1984-94 (per cent)

In post in the same ministry	19.2
Member of a *cabinet*	22.6
Public sector company	11.1
Private company	4.9
Non-ministerial *corps*	10.4
Inspection service	2.1
Directeur of another ministry	7.8
Member of a *grands corps*	6.7
Directeur in the same ministry	3.7
Paris city council or Île-de-France	2.3
Abroad	9.2

Source: Rouban (1996: 30)

Table 4

Immediate career trajectory of *directeurs d'administration centrale* 1984-94 (per cent)

Post in the same ministry	12.0
Post in another ministry	3.1
Public sector company	11.6
Private company	8.4
Returned to original grade in *corps*	11.2
Inspection service	6.9
Grands corps	10.4
Abroad	7.5
Elected to political office	0.6
Paris city council or Ile-de-France	0.6
Retirement	2.0

Source: Rouban (1996: 31)