France: An Introduction

France is sometimes represented as a hexagon (see p. xvi). The coasts of the Channel and then the Atlantic, the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean sea, the Alps and the Jura, the Vosges and the Rhine and the long land frontier with Luxembourg and Belgium seem to outline a regular pattern. The shape of France is not, however, the consequence of some long and rational process of geometrical neatness. It emerged only slowly, as successive French kings extended their control from their heartland around Paris, conquering Normandy, driving the English out of the South West and the West (Calais, the last English outpost, fell to the French in January 1558) asserting their domination over Burgundy (1481) and Provence (1491), and incorporating Brittany into the kingdom (1532). At the beginning of the nineteenth century Napoleon extended the sphere of metropolitan French administration into the Low Countries and parts of Germany and Northern Italy. In 1815 the Treaty of Vienna redefined France’s borders: Savoy and the town of Nice, which had been annexed during the Revolution were then lost. They were to return in 1860. The bitter history of Alsace (mostly incorporated into France in 1648) and Lorraine (incorporated in 1766) which were conquered and attached to the German Empire in 1870, regained by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, conquered again in 1940 and liberated in 1945 left a deep mark on French historical consciousness.

As a result, perhaps, of this chequered history and a certain obsession with French territorial integrity which derives from it, the French constitutions of both 1946 and 1958 proclaim France as a secular, democratic, social, but also indivisible republic. Like many
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constitutional pronouncements this is a statement of will and intention as much as of fact. The intention is to bring together a country of great diversity and a contested and conflict-ridden political history into a united nation state. In the hope of setting the context for the more extended discussions of the state of French government and politics which follow, this chapter attempts to outline some of the main elements of that diversity. An examination of the geographical and historical diversity of France is followed by a consideration of some of the factors which have contributed to political change and development. The impact of the Revolution, the legacy of Napoleon, the rise of the Republic, relationships between state and church and the period of Liberation and reconstruction have all had their repercussions upon the political, economic and social structures of France today.

Geographical Diversity

France, with a land area of 212,919 square miles (543,965 square kilometres) is the second largest country in Europe, exceeded only by the former Soviet Union. North and west of a line from the mouth of the Gironde to the Ardennes the land occasionally rises as high as 250 metres above sea level, and indeed much of North West France is less than 100 metres above sea level. South and east of this line the Massif Central which occupies about one sixth of the land area rises gradually southeastward with summits of over 1700 metres along the southern escarpment of the Cevennes. Its now extinct volcanoes were thrown up by the tectonic movements that produced the Alps. These, to the east, include the highest mountain in Europe, Mont Blanc (4807 metres). To the south of the Massif Central lie the undulating plains of Languedoc, separated by the valley of the Rhone from Provence, and from Spain by the mountain wall of the Pyrenees. North of the Alps are the wooded hills of the Jura, the Vosges and the Ardennes. More than 23 per cent of the land area of France is forested. The basins of the main rivers – Seine, Loire, Saône, Rhone, Garonne – shape and delineate the various regions.

The oceanic climate of the west of France with its moderate variations of temperature and its frequent and abundant rainfall gives way gradually to the east to a more continental type of climate, with greater extremes of temperature and lower rainfall. The south of