
Decentralization,¹ ‘la grande affaire du septennat’, was to be the socialists’ flagship policy and, ultimately, was to have a more lasting impact than the other more traditionally socialist reforms such as nationalization, the introduction of labour legislation (including, for example, the reduction of working hours) and more generous social welfare provisions. The latter reforms were the socialists’ attempt, in the early 1980s, to promote ‘Keynesianism in one country’ – France – in an international context where other countries were, by contrast, adopting the neo-liberal, market-based approaches pioneered by the US President Ronald Reagan and the UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. This approach, designed to increase welfare state provision in France, was severely punished by the international markets and by the flight of capital from France. By 1983, the socialist government, under Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, changed tack and fell into line with the other countries of Europe, returning to a modified version of the liberal policy approach which had been followed by Giscard d’Estaing. The decentralization reforms, on the other hand, proved to have a longer-lasting impact, although there is still a sense, 20 years or so after they were first initiated, that they are still incomplete.²

The decentralization proposals of the new socialist government, promoted by Gaston Defferre, as Minister of the Interior and Decentralization, were strongly backed by Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy. Both ministers were also powerful mayors of Marseille and Lille respectively and this would have an impact on the nature of the reforms. At first, the reforms were opposed by the right-wing parties, now in opposition, and especially by the Gaullists, still strongly attached to the centralized unitary state (despite their master’s conversion in 1969 to a kind of regionalism). Objections were also voiced by members of left-wing parties, including the Communist Party, the Mouvement des Radicaux de Gauche – MRG (Radical Left Movement) and by socialists such as Jean-Pierre Chevènement, leader of a think tank called the CERES (Centre d’études, de recherches et d’éducation...
socialiste – Centre for socialist study, research and education). President Mitterrand, too, was ambivalent about the reforms, in the same way as the British Prime Minister Tony Blair has been reticent about devolution in the UK. In truth, the objections came mainly from those individuals and parties – later self-described as ‘souverainistes’ – who had a traditional Jacobin understanding of the state and who feared that decentralization would endanger the principle of the unity and indivisibility of the Republic. They particularly opposed the creation of regional governments, fearing that these would challenge the role of the departments, which they viewed as important instruments of the republican state. Nevertheless, despite this opposition, the reformers had the momentum and energy to press ahead with the reforms. Compromises, nevertheless, still had to be made, in order to appease the objectors. For example, while the proposal to set up elected regional governments was adopted, the department was retained despite the political and administrative complexity that this would involve. This, in fact, is an aspect of French administrative history that surprises outside observers who tend to think of the French as bearers of a more rationalistic Cartesian intellectual tradition. In practice, they do not seem able to suppress previously existing institutions when new ones are created, thus leading to a very messy situation. This is known as the ‘millefeuille institutional français’, after the little gooey cake known as a ‘millefeuille’, which contains many interpenetrating layers of cream and pastry. The second important compromise, also related to this difficulty of suppressing layers of government, was that there was no attempt made to reduce the number of municipalities. Both of these issues – the problem of the great number of municipalities and the rivalry between the traditional departments and the new regions – are the subject of further analysis in later chapters.

It was these compromises and failures that led a number of early commentators to conclude, rather hastily, that the reforms did not introduce significant change into the French political and administrative system and that it was a case of ‘plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose’ (‘the more things change, the more they stay the same’) or as the Italian writer Giuseppe di Lampedusa expressed through one of the characters in his novel The Leopard: ‘si deve cambiare tutto per non cambiare nulla’ (‘For things to remain the same, everything must change’). An early French commentary on the decentralization reforms, entitled Le Sacre des Notables, published in 1985 under the pseudonym ‘Jacques Rondin’, but, in fact, a collective work written mainly by civil servants, claimed that all that decentralization had achieved was the underpinning and strengthening of the pre-existing system of rule by notables, which had characterized the existing French system of central-local relations and which had already been analysed by sociologists such as Michel Crozier, Jean-Claude Thoenig and Pierre Worms. The system of ‘complicity’ between the prefects, the administration and the local politicians, the notables, was a kind of part-