

Réunion

Getting Closer to Paris by Surfing the ‘Blue Wave’

The year 2002 reminded the people of Réunion of the power of nature. Cyclone Dina caused destruction and the Piton de la Fournaise volcano erupted twice, causing lava to spill over on to the coastal road and pour into the sea. The main political events were the French presidential elections, local general elections for the French Parliament and local district elections for the Department Council. In Reunion, the results represented a victory for what can be termed a ‘blue wave’, blue being the colour associated with the right-wing parties in France. These parties not only won the municipal elections in 18 out of 24 councils, but also took control of the General Council, which was previously a left-wing stronghold. Réunion’s voters followed metropolitan trends in this swing towards right-wing parties. They did not, however, follow national trends in voting for the French National Front during the second round of the presidential elections.

In 2002, a new political movement was created, the UMP (the *Union pour la majorite presidentiel*), which soon became the *Union pour un mouvement populaire*. This ‘Popular Movement Union’ gathered all right-wing parties together, including the former RPR (*Rassemblement pour la republique*), and the Liberal Right or DL (*Droite liberale*).

Two other major events made the news towards the end of the year. First, those on the national youth-employment programme (*Emplois jeunes*) campaigned hard to get an extension of their five-year contracts. The second was the heightened debate about changing the Constitution to modify Réunion’s status. The year 2002 was also the one in which the new airport was officially opened after five years of construction. A local airline was also created with the financial backing of the General and Regional Councils. However, Air Lib soon went into receivership after debts mounted rapidly. In response, the government tried to find a way to cut the cost of air travel between Réunion and Paris, in order to promote the ‘mobility’ of the population. Its aim was mainly to assist local youth to escape long-term unemployment on the island.

POLITICAL AFFAIRS

The proposal to change the Constitution was one of the priorities of President Jacques Chirac and was first presented to the French Senate on 7 November 2002 before being passed on to the National Assembly and adopted on 12 December.¹ After several weeks of active debate, the majority of UMP politicians voted for the Virapoullé amendment, which was supported by the president of the republic and the prime minister. This amendment prohibited any future prospects of greater legislative autonomy for Réunion. Local government would not even be able to change any land laws, for instance.² In both the Senate and the National Assembly, the Communist Party of Réunion (*Parti communiste réunionnais*; PCR) voted against the Virapoullé amendment. They argued that it ‘infantilised’ the Réunionnese people and their local representatives.³ The right-wing view was somewhat different: ‘Jacques Chirac respects the commitment he made during the presidential campaign. He wants to respect the will of the Réunionnese people by preserving the present status in Réunion’.⁴ In the new constitution, any future change in the legal framework of decision-making will have to pass through a referendum or some other public consultative process.

Just a month before the presidential elections, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin visited Réunion to campaign on the island. At the time, Jospin was the favourite in the

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national opinion polls in France and a highly popular figure. Just a few days later, he lost ground to Jacques Chirac. Jospin created difficulties for himself when, on his way back to Paris, he jokingly remarked to a Paris journalist that Chirac was looking 'aged, worn and tired'⁵ This comment marked the beginning of the end for Jospin, who was eliminated in the first round of the presidential elections. This left the field open for Jean-Marie Le Pen and the French National Front in the second round. It was in Réunion that Jospin's Socialist Party (*Parti socialiste*; PS) did best, however, countering the blue wave somewhat with 38% share of the vote in the first round, the highest score in France, where the average for Jospin was just 16.2%. Interestingly, 90% of the city councils in Réunion were led by the right at that time. As for Le Pen, in Réunion he received just 3.81% of the vote in the first round (the lowest in France), compared to a national average of 16.86%.⁶ On 1 May more than 8,000 students, academics and trade unionists demonstrated in the streets of Réunion's capital, Saint Denis, protesting against Le Pen's presence in the second round of the presidential elections. In the 15 days between the two election rounds, more than 50,000 people demonstrated throughout the island in a series of protests.

After the presidential election, 68 candidates—twice the number who had stood in 1997—ran for the five available parliamentary seats. On 16 June 2002, three new members were voted into Parliament: René-Paul Victoria (UMP), Bertho Audifax (UDF) and Christophe Payet (PS). Huguette Bello (PCR) and Andre Thien-Ah-Koon (UMP) both retained their seats for an additional five years. The major losers were Michel Tamaya (PS) and Claude Hoarau (PCR). On 16 June the right wing confirmed its return to many constituencies after an absence of 12 years. It was the coalition between the RPR, UDF and DL that had made it possible for the right to regain power in a total of 18 district councils in Réunion.⁷

THE GOVERNMENT (as of 2002)

<i>Minister for Overseas France/DOM-TOM</i>	Christian Paul
<i>Prefect</i>	Gonthier Friedericci
<i>President of the Department Council</i>	Jean Luc Poudroux (UMP)
<i>President of the Regional Council</i>	Paul Vergès (PCR)
<i>Deputies to the National Assembly</i>	René-Paul Victoria (UMP)
	Bertho Audifax (UDF)
	Christophe Payet (PS)
	Huguette Bello (PCR)
	André Thien-Ah-Koon (UMP)
<i>Senators</i>	Jean-Paul Virapoullé (UDF)
	Anne-Marie Payet (PCR)
	Paul Vergès (PCR)
<i>Deputies to the European Assembly</i>	Jean-Claude Fruteau (PS)
	Margie Sudre (UMP)

Brigitte Girardin, the new Minister for Overseas France (DOM-TOM) visited Réunion at least three times to promote a new political and legal programme to be implemented over the next 15 years in all the French overseas departments. She made herself known to the Réunionese and came across as ready to engage in dialogue but also conscious of the need to respect existing agendas. The slogan created in Chirac's election campaign, and then re-affirmed by Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, was that the right 'can do more in three months than the left wing achieved in three years in the DOM-TOM.'⁸ Girardin made this her prime focus in discussions with Réunionese politicians, the business community and the trade unions. In September 2002 these new plans were presented in Parliament to the Council of Ministers in Paris. The proposed measures included the following: from 1 September 2002, free plane tickets would be

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provided for young Réunionese wanting to undertake training in metropolitan France. This constituted a kind of 'passport to mobility' and the plans provided for generous additional financial support. The DOM-TOM advisor to Chirac even supported the creation of an airline especially designed for Overseas France.

The framework of the new legislation concentrates on social and economic development in Réunion over the next 15 years and aimed at achieving 'the regrowth of the Réunionese socioeconomic fabric by exempting from or lowering of social security contributions, new tax reductions and intensifying the project of territorial continuity'.⁹ Trade unions were not convinced that exempting firms from paying social security would create employment. But employers defended the exemption, arguing that local firms were threatened by cheap imports and needed initial support in order to expand into new markets overseas. Brigitte Girardin emphasized that now local Réunionese members of Parliament would determine how such policies would be translated into practice.¹⁰

SOCIAL AFFAIRS

There has been great concern and anxiety and even a state of 'red alert' among politicians, trade unions, professional associations and bureaucrats about the future of the 9,000 young people involved in Réunion's national youth employment programme (*Emplois Jeunes*), which represents 6% of the economically active population of the island. These young people are very worried about their future and have been trying to publicize their plight.¹¹ On 23 August, a number of them created 'Jobs in Danger', to monitor new policies that might affect their situation. During 2002, every time members of the government came to Réunion, they were met with protests and marches by thousands of young people. After experiencing roadblocks and vocal demonstrations, Minister Girardin tried to restore calm by proposing a number of practical solutions, for example an extension of their five-year contract for an additional three years. This would mean yet another national policy adapted to the specific needs of the *Emplois Jeunes* in the overseas departments, where long-term unemployment is on a scale unthinkable in most of metropolitan France.¹²

Réunion is an 'intense island', and the elements that cause the most intense disruptions are water, wind and fire. The Piton de la Fournaise volcano erupted on 5 January 2002,¹³ and again on 12 January, resulting in a new lava flow into the sea which lasted 40 days, blocking the only road in the south of the island. People had to be evacuated from their homes and Réunion 'grew' 10 ha,¹⁴—a new beach appearing where the water temperature reached a soaring 50°C in the days that followed. Next, Cyclone Dina hit Réunion on 22 January. There were no fatalities but the damage was considerable; this kind of damage had not been seen on the island since Cyclone Hyacinthe in 1981. Every year there are on average four or five cyclones that pass across or near the island.¹⁵ Winds of up to 290 km. per hour were recorded in Réunion's mountainous interior, and the cyclone brought with it a huge mass of water. There was flooding, especially on the west (leeward) coast, and electricity and water supplies were cut off for several weeks for thousands of Réunionese. In Cilaos, a remote region in the interior, people were completely cut off and could only come and go by helicopter. On 26 January, Christian Paul, the Minister of Overseas France (soon to be replaced by Brigitte Girardin), came to see the devastation firsthand and officially declared 'a state of natural disaster'. Because this occurred just four months before the elections, any failure to respond rapidly was noted.¹⁶

Jacques Barbey, one of the 5,000 Réunionese children who were forcibly removed from their families and placed with families in France ('Les enfants de la Creuse affaire') announced that he wished to sue the French Government for €1bn.¹⁷ He claimed that the state was responsible for what he calls 'the trade in Réunionese children'. Some even talk of 'deportation' to describe the exodus from Réunion under Michel Debré,

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the French member of Parliament for Réunion from 1962 to 1986. Between 1965 and 1972, it was official policy to remove certain disadvantaged Réunionese children from their homes in order to ‘repopulate’ the mainland French countryside, in particular the underpopulated rural department of Creuse. The poor living conditions of some lower-income Réunionese and the high birth rate in Réunion combined with growing unemployment to create a situation which Debré is said to have exploited. He argued at the time that these children faced a bleak future in Réunion, and much better prospects in Creuse, where they would become farmers, working the land, adding value and participating in the French economy.¹⁸ However, many of these children experienced abuse, including sexual abuse, which has fueled the current demands for compensation. The disclosure of this episode in Réunion’s history has created a huge scandal, comparable to that of the ‘stolen generations’ of Aboriginal Australians. After archival investigations, journalists discovered that the term ‘deportation’ had been used by the then general manager of the Health Ministry, Pierre Denoix, in an interview dating from 1975 about the ‘Children of Creuse’.¹⁹ This story is not yet over.

TABLE 1. UNEMPLOYMENT, MINIMUM WAGE, AND WELFARE BENEFITS IN RÉUNION

	1998	2000	2002	
Unemployment (%)	34.2	36.9	31.9	9.0
<i>SMIC</i> ¹	6.13	6.40	.64	6.64
welfare recipients	57,788	62,435	67,915	1,218 762
General price index ²	100.0	102.6	107.9	106.4

¹ Minimum wage in euro.

² Price index at the end of the year (base 100: 1998) excluding tobacco.

Source: INSEE, *Tableau Economique de la Réunion*, Saint Denis, Edition 2002/2003 and IEDOM, Saint André 2003.

SUSPECTED TERRORIST ARRESTED

In Tampon, in the highland interior of Réunion Island, on 26 November 2001, a 55-year-old Tunisian man was arrested by police officers from Paris and placed in police custody.²⁰ The man was suspected of having links to a previous terrorist scare together with Richard Reid, a Briton, who was arrested in December 2001 for planning a terrorist attack on a Paris-Miami flight. The Tunisian suspect was a former caretaker of the mosque in Paris that Richard Reid also attended. He had been living in Réunion for just a few months at the time of his arrest.

POPULATION

TABLE 2: DEMOGRAPHIC INDICATORS (AS OF 31ST DECEMBER 2002)

Years	2000	2002	France 2002
Estimated population	734,765	749,600	64,145 371
Births	14,594	14,897	775,098
Deaths	3,825	4,012	536,300
Birth rate*	20.2	20.1	13.1
Mortality rate*	5.2	5.4	9.0
Overall level of fertility	2.32	2.50	1.9

*Per thousand inhabitants.

Source: *T.E.R.*, Saint André, Edition 2003.

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The population of Réunion totals 749,600 persons, which is above average for a metropolitan department. More than one in three Réunionese is under the age of 20 in contrast to a one in four ratio in France as a whole, where there was a 1.6% annual increase in population during 1991–2001. The total increase in Réunion is 1.8% per year when positive net migration into the island is taken into account.²¹ This means that around 7,250 new job seekers arrive on the labour market every year.²² On average, between 1991 and 2001, the gap between the newly available for work and the jobs created meant a shortfall of about 4,000 jobs annually.²³ These elements explain why the unemployment rate in Réunion is as high as 30–35%. This situation is characterized by precarious living conditions for a large part of the population. Although income from work in the informal sector can also contribute to household income, fully 24% of households depend directly or indirectly on unemployment benefits in the form of the minimum allowance (*Revenu minimum d'insertion*; RMI). This compares with just 3% of households in metropolitan France.²⁴

In line with the general economic downturn, employment creation fell sharply in 2002. Indeed, according to INSEE, wage-earning employment increased by just 3% in 2002, compared to an increase of 5% the previous year.²⁵ This slowdown in the economy meant that just 2,800 jobs were created in 2002 as opposed to 7,300 in 2000 and 4,400 in 2001. This has also negatively affected the government unemployment insurance plan.²⁶

CULTURE AND SPORTS

Réunion lost two great musicians in 2002. The first was Jules Joron, who died at the age of 77 on 16 January after a long illness.²⁷ The poet-singer from the south of the island will have a place in popular history, with his memorable brand of Segga music (Segga is the musical style of Réunion and nearby Mauritius). Joron is succeeded by the popular band Oussanoussava, comprised of his children. Another well-known singer, Loulou Pitou, died on 20 June at the age of 78.²⁸ It was also a year of new beginnings in the cultural field, and in September Paul Vergès, president of the Regional Council, launched the *Maison des civilisations et de l'unité réunionnaise* (MCUR) with a budget of €87m. For the first time there exists a tangible, professionally-run project concerning culture and ethnicity in Réunion. On 8 June 2002, journalists, players and specialists in international handball voted the Réunionese Jackson Richardson, the best midfield player of all time. This was the first time a Réunionese sportsman was recognized in such a high-profile way.²⁹

ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

TABLE 3: CENTRAL STATE EXPENDITURE IN MILLION EUROS

Year	1998	2000	2002
Budget of Region	319	336	360
Budget of Department	654	690	640
Budget of Local Communes	903	690	612
State Budget (Out)	2,360	2,564	2,515
State Budget (In)	1,217	1,231	1,146

Source: IEDOM, Saint André, Edition 2003

On 1 January 2002, a memorable date in the calendar of European unification, the euro came into circulation in France and Réunion. In Saint Denis, the capital of Réunion, the arrival of the euro was celebrated through a satellite link-up with Paris. This involved Laurent Fabius, Minister of the Economy. Réunion was the first European zone to see the euro come into circulation as the official currency, and during

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the year it became firmly embedded in the collective consciousness. Shopkeepers and traders have benefitted enormously from the ‘euro changeover’ by increasing prices dramatically overnight. Although all shopkeepers and traders deny this, it seems indisputable that they took advantage of a certain amount of confusion to inflate prices.³⁰ The adverse effect on the family budget brought about a slump in purchase of consumer goods. At the same time, perhaps because of an increasingly uncertain international climate, household savings rose.

Réunion has a large structural imbalance since its ‘imports’ are worth 12 times its ‘exports’. Sugar cane production still represents 40% of the value of all goods exported, and exports overall progressed in 2002 thanks to a growth in exports of fish products, which rose to 22% of exports.³¹ The importance of tourism as a generator of revenue should also be underscored as it represents 158% of the total value of all tangible exports. A high degree of dependence on France for most imported goods has led to price increases in line with French trends.

Réunion’s consumers suffer from an insecure supply and inflated prices for certain fresh products. This is particularly the case during the cyclone season.³² Credit loans to private households increased by 8.7% in 2002.³³ Total financial assets were €6.43bn in December 2002, and of these deposits, cash investments and short- and long-term savings, almost two thirds (64%) were household savings and investments. Between 2001 and 2002, whereas the growth in investment by private businesses slowed down from 9.4% to 3.2%,³⁴ household savings grew slightly more rapidly: 8.8% compared with 8%.³⁵ This cautiousness reflects an increasingly uncertain international climate and concerns, also reflected in mainland France, about the financial future as it affects pension funds in particular. The higher savings rate was facilitated by increased wages in the public and private sectors of 5% and 6% respectively, and in benefit increases too.³⁶ Due to Cyclone Dina, Réunion’s agriculture suffered, especially the fruit and vegetable sub-sector, in which production fell from 41% to 28% overall.³⁷ Sugar cane production was also affected, and hopes of reaching 2m t of output were dashed. In the second quarter of 2002, new capital expenditure on public buildings and infrastructure increased following the cyclone. However, such expenditure declined later in the year, with few new development sites.³⁸

TABLE 5. IMPORTS AND EXPORTS

Year	1998	2000	2002
Total imports ¹	2,350	2,491	2,610
From France ¹	639	577	599
From EU ¹	199	229	258
From other countries ¹	1,511	1,685	1,753
Total in Euro	2,333	2,723	2,966
From France in euro ²	1,542	1,714	1,881
From EU in euro ²	375	361	394
From other countries in Euro ²	416	649	691
Total exports ¹	236	253	272
Total in millions Euro	185	226	221
Commercial balance ²	- 2,108	- 2,497	- 2,745

¹ In thousands of tons.

² In millions of euros.

Source: *Direction des Douanes, LA RÉUNION, Ministère des Finances et des Douanes, St-Denis, 2003.*

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The privatization of Air France, combined with financial problems in Air Lib, and the takeover of Corsair by German firms, meant that in 2002 the future of Réunion's airlines was more uncertain than ever. This affected the Réunion-Paris link, a crucial part of the government's new proposals for 'territorial continuity' and free travel for Réunion's unemployed youth. Politicians and the public alike feared the demise of the newer airline companies and a return to the 'bad old days' of the Air France monopoly. To address this problem, the Regional and General Councils decided to support a Réunion-Paris connection through Air Austral, in which both councils are shareholders. This was the only local airline to accept the challenge. During a debate about the Air France monopoly, Paul Vergès, president of the Regional Council said, 'The Réunionese people are now fully prepared to take responsibility for the air link with Paris ... and Air Austral will be the means to achieve this'.³⁹ Three weeks later, the president of the General Council, Jean-Luc Poudroux, specified the council's wish to see 'Air Austral providing part of the air link between Réunion and Paris'.⁴⁰ A letter was sent to the French prime minister asking him to take these requests into account. The manager and founder of Air Austral, Gerard Etheve, recognized at the time that 'our future is in long-haul flights', and awaited the green light from Paris.⁴¹ Originally Etheve was referring to a Mayotte-Paris link, but eventually it was agreed by the Air Austral board of directors that a Réunion-Paris link was the greater priority.⁴² Air France grumbled somewhat at the prospect, but was forced to recognize it. Therefore, 12 years after Air Austral was founded, and 28 years after its predecessor Réunion Air Service was created, the Air France monopoly on regular flights between Réunion and Paris was finally coming to an end. This was confirmed in early November 2002, with the reelection of Gerard Etheve as president of the Air Austral board for an additional three years. The first flights were due to start on 28 June 2003. It was agreed that one daily Boeing 777 flight would depart each way. Paul Vergès called it a 'historic moment' in Réunion's history.⁴³ On the first day that tickets went on sale, the inaugural flight was fully booked.

The actual infrastructure needed to support increased airport activity was less promising. The president of Réunion's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Alain Mace, confessed: 'I am so ashamed of how long the renovations have taken that I am not going to the inaugural ceremony of the Roland Garros International Airport'.⁴⁴ It took fully five years to extend the airport runway by 16,000 sq. metres, a task that should have taken three years at the most.⁴⁵ The project also went dramatically over budget, because the gradient of the runway as initially proposed was too steep, and as a result supplies needed for the project were delayed. The hangar doors were also reported to be too small, as was the new parking lot. The net result was additional costs of €1m and two more years of construction work. However after all these years, the airport can now accommodate up to 2.5m passengers per year (actual numbers were 1.5m per year before the extension was started).⁴⁶ The extension project will continue, with further work estimated to cost at least €5.5m.⁴⁷

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TOURISM

TABLE 6. NUMBERS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF TOURISTS

Years	1998	2000	2002
Numbers of Tourists	400,000	430,000	426,000
Countries of Residence			
France	320,389	345,230	334,300
Other European Union	8,588	14,459	17,200
Mauritius	37,993	36,988	30,600
Other	33,029	33,322	43,900
Accommodation			
Hotel	141,742	150,933	139,800
Holiday village or cottage	51,466	55,262	58,600
Renting	14,315	24,440	26,400
Family or friends	175,470	188,567	191,500
Other	17,007	10,797	9,700

Source: *Economie de La Réunion*. Revue de l'INSEE. St-Andre: Juin 2003.

In 2002, some forms of tourism suffered from growing international insecurity and tension. There was also passenger distrust of Air Lib, whose financial difficulties were becoming notorious. Nevertheless the overall number of visitors was fairly stable, partly because Réunion appears to be a 'refuge' destination for metropolitan French and other European Union tourists in an increasingly troubled international context. Réunion was the second most popular tourist destinations in the southwest Indian Ocean after Mauritius (682,000 tourists in 2002).⁴⁸ The tourists also tended to stay longer and spend a bit more money in Réunion: about €1,196 per couple, making a total of €302m in 2002.⁴⁹ According to those working in this sector, the average length of stay has risen, as has the price of hotels, food and car rentals, which are the main items in any tourist's budget. The overall economic impact of the sector is estimated to reach almost €350m.⁵⁰ The number of tourists does not tally with the number of hotel customers since many tourists are Réunionese visiting their own relatives and friends. Most hotels are located in the western part of the island, where fake beaches have had to be created to cater to tourists' preference for sea and sand, something in which Réunion—with its volcanic peaks and live volcano—is not well endowed.⁵¹ All in all, 2002 was a year where the vagaries of nature served to bring home to the Réunion population their continuing financial and political dependence on France. It was also a year in which specifically Réunionese initiatives started to bear fruit in some important sectors of the economy.

—Helen Hintjens and Laurent edea

NOTES

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