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**The Mouvement Républicain Populaire:  
Its Role and Position in French Politics in 1951**

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**A thesis  
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the requirements for the Degree**

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in the  
State Aid to Private Schools.  
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iv The MRP and Political Reality.  
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ABSTRACT

The Liberation of France in 1944 was the occasion for the emergence of a new Christian Democratic party in the form of a mass movement. This grouping, called the Mouvement Républicain Populaire, drew its support from many sources and, because of the diversity of its electorate and because it was on the left politically, even though it was the "Catholic" party, it was open to challenges from both political extremes. The MRP was one of the four centre groups that, from 1947 on, provided the governments. However, these groups, although forced to live together, were unable to become united and provide a stable majority coalition government. Nor could they call upon the nation to provide them with wide powers as not only was it against their own principles, but also the populace preferred the government to be weak. During the post-war years to 1952 a struggle could be observed as the centre parties attempted to remain in control together and yet to put their own individual programmes into effect. Eventually, in 1951, an electoral law was passed that ensured, at least for the moment, their continued survival as the makers of governments. It did nothing, however, to ensure that the centre parties would cooperate, and they split, leaving the way open for a swing to the right which, although only temporary, was a portent of things to come and a hint as to the general temper of the country. Probably the party that suffered the most as a result of developments during these years was the MRP which lost its controlling position as umpire and was relegated to the bench as one of the players.

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CHAPTER I

THE MRP AND THE EARLY FOURTH REPUBLIC

In 1947 the MRP displayed an intent to remain politically on the left by resisting the appeal of General de Gaulle. At the time this cost them most of their conservative following and gave greater weight to their working class rank and file. The Mouvement Républicain Populaire attempted to appear not as a "class" party, however, but rather as a movement serving all groups in France, hence the significance of its name. It was difficult for the MRP to be a 'mouvement' in anything but name, however, as its geographical centres of strength were so limited that proper contact with all groups in France was out of the question. Nor could the party successfully defend its claim to be free from class allegiance as even a cursory glance would reveal that the party was primarily confined to a social milieu that might best be described as that portion of French lower middle class composed of practising Catholics. To the detriment of party membership the MRP was not conservative enough in political, economic and social matters to satisfy most of the upper class or the grande bourgeoisie in the cities, most of whom were closely connected with business. On the other hand the MRP was too conservative to draw the bulk of its support from the lower class. The overall political tendency of the MRP was towards conservatism and as the years passed it found itself forced increasingly into a more conservative role, replacing, in its local strongholds, the moderate or conservative parties of the Third Republic. It found itself forced to do this as its electoral base started to fragment as the war years retreated into the past and as new political movements arose that proved more attractive to many of the newer supporters of the latest Christian Democratic party. "The Resistance provided MRP with prestige and a party élite, but MRP's Resistance background was not an unmixed blessing. Many Conservatives and moderates got on to the bandwagon in 1945-46. Their own parties had been discredited by their

Vichy connections, and they voted MRP not because they wanted a 'new France' with greater economic and social justice, but because they wanted to clear their consciences or because they were anti-Communist. They were with, but not of, MRP. Like the Gaullists, who wrongly assumed that 'le parti de la Fidélité' would play follow-my-leader to the General whatever the circumstances, most left MRP in 1947. The desertion of MRP by these groups weakened the party numerically, but, like the Catholic Church after the Counter-Reformation, MRP emerged smaller but more united. Nevertheless, it is arguable that this early over-inflation did more harm than good. The party's organization was stretched to the limit, too many early deputies lacked political experience, and when the desertions came, the militants were more depressed than they might otherwise have been." <sup>1</sup>

On the 7 September 1948 the insecure cabinet of Robert Schuman, who had been narrowly elected to a second premiership and who had chosen the only Socialist Minister of Finance between 1946 and 1956, Christian Pineau, was overthrown after a two day tenure - his first had lasted only four days. Finally, three days later Henri Queuille, a Radical leader from pre-war days, was elected prime minister. "The significance of this long ministerial crisis was great though negative. In terms of measures it proved the impracticability of any clear-out orientation of policy, whether Right or Left, and in terms both of men and of constitutional methods it seemed for a time to mark the triumph of the defunct Third Republic over the upstart Fourth. At the Liberation new leaders had replaced the discredited seniors; but soon the old politicians were recalled. None of the first three premiers had held office before the war; four of the next five had done so.... The events of August and September 1948 defined an equilibrium of forces which was to last for three years. The older leaders and groups regained a share in power but not a monopoly or even a preponderance; the constitutional pendulum

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<sup>1</sup> R. E. M. Irving, *Christian Democracy in France*, pp.77-78.

swung half-way back to the Third Republic. The failures of Reynaud and Pineau showed that no wholehearted policy, Conservative or Socialist could command the support of the Assembly. The centre parties were 'condemned to live together' in compromise and frustration." 2

This was in effect the major obstacle to the creation of stable governments. The electorate insisted on electing candidates from a large number of diverse political groupings. This was particularly the case after the united rule of the 3 large political parties, known as tripartisme, disintegrated in 1947.

This new era of French political history started under the guidance of the equanimous Henri Queuille who apparently had as one of his major aims the goal of ensuring that ministerial crises could occur without endangering the régime. The threat to the régime posed by these crises was implicit rather than explicit in that the public tended to lose confidence in the political leadership that was and the system in general. This loss of confidence was something that was vitally important for the men of the centre to avoid as in times of stress polarization of political opinion occurred and groupings such as the French Communist Party (PCF) and de Gaulle's right-wing Rassemblement du Peuple Français (the RPF was founded in 1947 in response to just such a demand) received the support that was so badly needed by the centre parties. A more stable political climate was needed therefore so that the transfer of power from one Government to another could occur without the régime and the political ascendancy of the centre being endangered. This was the situation that Queuille sought to create. He succeeded and was able to resign in safety on the 5th of October 1949. There followed several attempts to form governments before the MRP saw its opportunity and, taking advantage of the public's growing impatience with the ever bickering politicians, Bidault refused to confront the Assembly until the parties had accepted his cabinet; the Assembly, almost

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2 P. M. Williams, *Crisis and Compromise*, pp.35-36.

exasperated with itself, agreed to Bidault's cabinet. Thus a new government was installed to face the old problems, and in particular that of finance and the budget, an issue which almost led to the ministry's defeat in December. In February the Socialists resigned over the wages policy, and four months later they turned Bidault out over the salaries of civil servants, many of whom were Socialist voters. The crisis of June - July 1950, after the fall of Bidault, showed that the political balance had changed little in the previous two years. "Trois gouvernements se sont succédés en dix-huit mois et les trois crises ont duré à elles seules près de deux mois. Il a été prouvé qu'on ne pouvait gouverner ni avec ni sans les socialistes. En fait la rupture entre eux et les autres partis est moralement acquise dès la chute du premier ministre Queuille qu'ils ont provoqué à l'automne 1949. Ce divorce politique est une conséquence lointaine mais certaine du départ des communistes. De moins en moins les socialistes se sentent à l'aise dans une majorité où les modérés et les libéraux comptent et sont de plus en plus. Quand la gauche pousse son avantage, c'est la droite qui se retire ou inversement. La cohabitation devient impossible ou suppose l'immobilisme." 3 In effect a form of stalemate had been reached. There was considerable bickering and many issues led to serious quarrels; and yet effective control of the government remained with the same parties of the 'centre', the MRP, the Socialists and the Radicals, in some form of coalition or other. The approaching general election in 1951 made coalitions even harder to maintain. Mistrust between the Socialists and the MRP had persisted since the former left the Bidault government, and worsened in November when several MRP deputies voted to impeach the Socialist leader, Jules Moch, the minister of defence and principal colleague of the leader of the new ministry, René Pleven. Moreover the conflict over economic policy broke out again, Socialists and the MRP advocating industrial subsidies,

3 J. Fauvet, *La IVe République*, pp. 165-166.

and the Radicals and Conservatives opposing them. The most serious conflict of all, however, was that over electoral law reform. When Queuille came to power in March 1951 he decided that, in order to minimize the ravages of electoral fever and to attempt to hold political France together, it was necessary to hold the elections in June, four months early. As no electoral reform could pass without the consent of the MRP, he persuaded his Radical colleagues to give way, and the new electoral law and the budget were passed just in time for the elections of 17 June. The electoral law allowed 'national' parties, that is, those parties contesting the election in at least thirty départements, to ally with one another and to pool their votes. An element of proportional representation had been introduced but in such circumstances that this could only serve to benefit the four parties of the régime, the MRP, the Socialists, the Radicals and the Conservatives, as the other two major parties of the day were unwilling to ally themselves to any other organizations and this cost them seats. Consequently, the four parties of the régime gained a narrow popular majority. However, these four parties were divided over the social reforms of the Liberation - which were still approved by a majority of voters, in particular by those who supported the Communists, the Socialists, the MRP and some of the RPF's (de Gaulle's party) supporters - and over the question of church schools and whether or not aid should be given to them. The balance in the electorate was now very close indeed with regard to this issue. As the Socialists were eager to escape taking responsibility for the policies of others, the RPF was able to achieve a commanding position by widening the breach between them and their former partners. It did so by using the clerical question to divide the centre parties in much the same way as the Communists had done six years before. In effect, the RPF made a bid for a portion of the MRP's following by its outspoken statements in favour of state aid for church schools. This forced the parliamentary wing of the MRP to support the call for aid, as expressed in the Loi Barangé, against their own wishes because otherwise



they stood to lose their more conservative supporters and this would have effectively crippled the MRP. "In a real sense the schools question was the test for Christian Democracy in France. If progressive Catholics and moderate Socialists could get over this hurdle, it might be possible to develop a non-sectarian party of reform - like the British Labour Party. If not Catholics would be under increasing pressure to return to their traditional place on the right wing of the political spectrum." 4 The schools question remained as a blight upon the French political landscape; so much so in fact, that it may be regarded as one of the chief reasons for the limited success of Christian Democracy in France.

The MRP's connections with Catholicism, as with its Resistance inheritance both helped and hindered the party. Unlike the German Christlich Demokratische Union, the MRP made very little impression on the non-Catholic electorate. The post-war Catholic revival, the strength of Catholic Action and the broad support of the Catholic trade union federation, the CFTC, generally benefited the MRP whereas, from almost every other point of view the party's failure to rid itself of a 'confessional' image was a disadvantage. Above all it resulted in the MRP becoming almost entirely a regional party, in contrast to both the German CDU and the Italian Democrazia Christiana. In spite of the existence of the Peasant Party, the MRP was in a very real sense the farmers' party. It was therefore natural that the Christian Democrats should be deeply involved in agricultural politics, both in government and through their rural organizations. The MRP's agricultural policy was neither collectivist nor individualist. The party favoured the continuation of peasant farming but, unlike the Communists, did not limit itself only to the defence of the small farmer. In the Fourth

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4 R. E. M. Irving, Christian Democracy in France, p. 21.

5 C. Didault, Resistance, p. 105.

Republic approximately one-seventh of the MRP's deputies were farmers. At the 1951 party Congress it was claimed that 15% of the MRP's members were farmers, whilst in 1960 the figure was put at 22%. This growth coincided with the growth of the Jeunesse Agricole Chrétienne. The proportion of MRP rural members and deputies also inevitably rose as the party was pushed back into agricultural (and Catholic) strongholds such as Brittany.

In his book Georges Bidault wrote, concerning the MRP, "I think the party's outlook was too narrow, too preoccupied with social problems - an admirable attitude, but one which left the MRP blind to the true perils of Communism for a very long time." <sup>5</sup> It was a pity that he compromised himself over the Algerian question and consequently felt obliged to defend his position. Nonetheless it is true that the MRP was very interested in social problems, even if solutions were neither readily at hand nor, when they were available, easily legislated.

The MRP originated outside politics in the narrow sense of the word. It emerged from the dynamics of the Resistance and, in part, the form it took was determined by the Church's influence. However, the MRP would not have known its extraordinary development and its success would have been ephemeral if movements with the same ideas had not existed before it, and especially if the Church in 1939 had not multiplied the popular groups which extended its ascendancy over a part of French youth. From 1930 to the War, everything happened as if a plan had been formulated to prepare the cadres for a great French Catholic party, or at least to make such a party possible. Nonetheless, in spite of this background, or, perhaps because of it, "it was the MRP that, in 1944, took the only effective step ventured by any Resistance group to transform itself into a political party. The leaders of the MRP believed that the Communist Party should not be allowed to stand as the only political revolutionary movement in France.

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5 G. Bidault, *Resistance*, P.109.

A vacuum had been created by the inertia of other former political groups in France, and the MRP stepped into that vacuum." 6 The MRP was the first political party of Catholic inspiration in France not to arouse the sworn hostility of the laïques. The future good relations between the MRP and French liberals or social democrats (under whatever party label they might appear) depended on the MRP maintaining a certain non-confessional character, although, as over the Loi Barangé, it was sometimes necessary for the party to admit its religious ties and vote accordingly in order to protect itself. The problem consisted in the difficulty of reconciling cooperation with the lay parties - this was necessary as otherwise the group of centrist parties, known as the 'troisième force', would not have had the strength to resist the challenges from the extremes - with a continued appeal to its electorate, which had a certain clerical character. The leaders of the MRP were important to the general direction that the movement took. "Of course it is possible for a party with only regional strength and with a conservative, nationally minded electorate to prosecute an internationalist policy if it has leaders with a degree of political prestige who are themselves internationally minded. Pflimlin and Schuman of the MRP, coming as they do from the border provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, were internationally minded, but Schuman did not have enough political influence within the French parliament. Teitgen, a perennial President of the party, owed his allegiance to the conservative, clerical voters of Brittany. De Menthon came from the mountainous department of Haute-Savoie, and Bidault from Haute-Loire, almost the geographical centre of France. These two leaders, especially Bidault, had considerable political prestige. But just as American isolationism in the past has been predominantly located in

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6 R. B. Capelle, *The MRP and French Foreign Policy*, P.10.

7 R. B. Capelle, *The MRP and French Foreign Policy*, pp. 12-13.

8 A. Grosser, *La IVe République et sa politique extérieure*, p.100.

the Middle-West, so also is nationalism especially strong in the mountainous departments of France like Haute-Savoie or in centrally located departments like Haute-Loire. It was Bidault who removed himself from the MRP after 1958 because of his extremely nationalistic approach to the Algerian question." 7

The Christian Democratic doctrine of the MRP has often been used as an alternative to Communist theory, particularly in these, the earlier years of the Fourth Republic, instead of simply as a justification for some form of Western democracy. The MRP leaders seem to have been stimulated by their religious background to find a positive alternative to Marx which would reconcile his progressive social thoughts with a more sympathetic attitude towards religion. Ideological factors were important in the MRP - a great deal of its strength came from people who believed that it embodied the best traditions of Christian Democracy. Liberal Catholicism, social Catholicism, and Christian Democracy, in fact all shades of Catholic opinion short of intégrisme could find a home within the ranks of the MRP. The notion of a catholic citizen brought in its train two complementary requirements: the refusal to become isolated, and action against established structures and institutions. "Les deux exigences aboutissent au même résultat. Le catholicisme français se trouve amené à refuser l'ordre établi parce que cet ordre comprend trop d'injustice. Parler d'ordre à établir plutôt que d'ordre à préserver ne revient pas seulement à se situer du côté du mouvement ou si l'on préfère, de la gauche. Ceci aboutit nécessairement à un refus de la notion de civilisation chrétienne." 8 Both this view and that which it opposed (that an individual should be politically, economically and socially isolated, that there be, in other words, a semi-segregated society), were represented within the MRP, hence many of its difficulties. If the MRP had to confine itself to the

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7 R. B. Capelle, *The MRP and French Foreign Policy*, pp. 12-13.

8 A. Grosser, *La IVe République et sa politique extérieure*, P.184.

Catholic electorate for the vast majority of its support, it found this electorate somewhat fickle. At this time nearly eighty-five percent of the population could be classified as Catholic because of their background. However, only eighteen percent of the population were actually 'fidèles', although this did not preclude many of the others being either "pratiquants" at a somewhat lower key or "croyants." Yet in 1951 the MRP received only 12% of the votes cast, and it was a large turnout. There is some justification for the assertion that practising Christians in France were less attached to their Christian Democratic party (in its broadest sense) than those in other European countries. Yet the MRP, of all the major French parties, would most probably have had the most balanced representation of all classes or groups, at least during its early years. On all levels of its organization, the MRP included specialized teams of and for workers, agriculture, youth, cadres and liberal professions, women, overseas groups and elected municipal officials. All but the last two had their counterparts in Catholic Action. Most of these teams were rather unimportant to the functioning and recruitment of the MRP, probably they were retained in order to keep unofficial ties with Catholic Action. However, the rural team was an exception: it furnished a substantial number of MRP members and deputies and worked to extend the MRP into new areas of France.

The question as to what degree the political stances of the MRP were affected by the Church was brought to the fore by the church schools problems in particular, but, of course, did not stop there. "For the MRP the school problem was considered in a religious context as well as within a more pragmatic framework. An official MRP brochure, widely distributed before the 1951 election, proclaimed that "... school liberty, closely tied to religious liberty, must be effective, not only for the privileged rich, but also for the poorest families." Finally, some Catholic tenets made it practically impossible for the MRP to approve certain policies, while others stimulated it to favour other policies.

The MRP would be very hard-pressed to favour a law liberalizing divorce or birth-control practices, while on the other hand it actively supports measures of state aid to large families, helps to continue indirect state aid to non-Communist youth organizations, and in general favours the growth of 'intermediary bodies'. " 9

More than anything else the MRP represented the broad tendency within French Catholicism called Christian Democracy. Catholics who were content to preserve the social inequalities of 'static France', or who desired to extend the hierarchy principle from the Church to the political order, were generally more at home in other political formations. This Christian Democratic tendency had a rich past. Christian Democracy is hard to define, since it has been used in several different ways during its century of development. Nonetheless it can be said to contain four basic assertions about the nature of man: that all men are responsible, free and active persons in whom 'the spirit transcends matter'; that man realizes his spiritual and material well-being only as a member of society; that the aims of political action never can be finally fixed, but represent a succession of stages; that each man will be able to develop his faculties only if the entire society is organized throughout all of its structures on the basis of the privacy of every man, respecting his liberty and permitting him to exercise his responsibilities. The Christian Democrats also furnished the MRP with three 'laws of history': that men, through free will, are the makers of their own happiness or misery; that progress occurs primarily through a change in the spiritual sphere of society; that the competition and cooperation of forces, spiritual families, or civilizations cause its great movements; progress occurs through a dialectical process in which a dominant spiritual family generates its opposite. Other Christian Democratic views would include a neo-Thomistic theory of man and society; and an economic system based on the

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9 W. Bosworth, *Catholicism And Crisis in Modern France*, P.259.

recognition of individual and group rights. The MRP was not, however, always faithful to its philosophical heritage, especially to the notion of political pluralism, once it had massive political strength itself. The most striking thing about all these principles is their vagueness. One also has the impression that in developing towards 'dead centre' the MRP renounced those principles that seemed to evoke specific programmes; for instance, the social control of certain private property. Still, many other ideas must also be included within the Christian Democratic philosophy, among them the notion of personalism - the development of the whole man - and pluralism - the opposition to totalitarianism through competing and diverse social groupings. The activities of the MRP were not like those of Catholic Action or social action groups. They were not explicitly or implicitly designed for a religious end, nor were they explicitly or implicitly controlled by the 'Hierarchy'. Many had a pragmatic or political or economic, but not religious, *raison d'être*.

The divisions between French Catholics were such that on occasion their conflicts could appear as ideological struggles and even as the only real pitiless struggle in France. "Quand on essaie de voir claire dans cette mêlée, il faut se garder de deux tentations: tout réduire à une opposition politique entre une droite et une gauche, tout décrire en termes de discordes comme si le catholicisme Français n'avait pas de traits originaux bien marqués. Les notions de "droite" et de "gauche" conviennent mal, ne serait-ce qu'à cause de la nécessité de distinguer des extrêmes et des modérés... En outre, les mots "gauche" et "droite" font oublier l'existence de problèmes théologiques et philosophiques indépendants de l'évolution politique. Aussi vaudrait-il mieux parler de "chrétiens non-traditionnels" et de "chrétiens traditionnels", ce qui laisse cependant de côté les "ultras": les chrétiens progressistes tentés par le communisme, les intégristes attirés

10. A. Grosser, *La 1<sup>re</sup> République et sa politique extérieure*, p. 180-181.

11. R. L. Capelle, *The MRP and French Foreign Policy*, p. 47.

par une sorte de fascisme. Les progressistes font parler d'eux pendant les premières années de la IVe République, les intégristes contribuent à en abrégier la dernière... Dans une certaine mesure, il y a bien une sorte de flux puis de reflux. L'intervention de Rome contribue beaucoup à celui-ci. Depuis l'encyclique *Humani Generis* en 1950." 10

The gist of the distinction between Christian Democrats and Social Catholics was that the former sought to achieve social reforms for the masses through the direct participation of Catholics in politics in some form of party organization. In contrast social Catholics believed that higher officials of the Church should take indirect political action to provide for the masses the amount of social reform considered advisable by the Catholic Right; for instance, they favoured a hierarchical political organization, with control being exerted downward from the higher levels. Social Catholics believed that it was the function of the church to inspire the enactment of social measures and to define the attitudes that others should have. Paternalism was favoured, and, in contrast to the emphasis on politics of individual Christian Democrats, Social Catholics gave priority to the Church over political considerations.

At times some MRP leaders were quick to seize the initiative in pursuance of their ideology, as did Schuman in announcing his Plan in 1950. But they usually had to be more circumspect because of their positions of responsibility in the Government. "On the surface, policy is supposedly created by combined discussion and decisions on various levels of the MRP party structure. Besides the local sections and department federations, there is a national committee, as well as a National Congress, which meets once a year." 11 Perhaps the best illustration of the centralized character of the MRP was to be found in the ways in which party political activity, at the levels of sections

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10 A Grosser, *La IVe République et sa politique extérieure*, pp. 180-181.

11 R. B. Capelle, *The MRP and French Foreign Policy*, p.22.



and federations, was regulated from above. The National Statutes of the MRP provided that party meetings within a federation must be authorized by the controlling body of the federation in question. For a member of the party to participate in other meetings, he had to take the advice of the president of the federation in whose area the meeting was to be held. Any discord was to be resolved by the National Executive Committee. One of the weaknesses of the MRP, in spite of the fact of its ideology and its support of pluralism, was its failure to foster enough local support and political activity to make a spontaneous community life possible, thereby falling in step with France as it fell out of step with its own doctrine. The MRP had developed its theoretical support for pluralism only in respect to the family group. It had failed to maintain direct contacts with public opinion and to stress the civic spirit. This weakness was mainly a reflection of the fact that it had been from the beginning a centralized party. The centralization of control in the hands of a few leaders (however much they might disagree among themselves) allowed scant leeway for the decentralization of power implicit in the idea of pluralism. The party was enthusiastic about local or regional planning in social and economic matters, but was sceptical about provincial autonomy. Thus through its centralization of control, the MRP preserved to all outward appearances a surprising degree of cohesion, but close examination discloses a striking dualism within the party. If the MRP pretended to be a movement then its leaders and thinkers who led in the search for the way to develop for instance European integration, were few in number. Since they were so few, one would expect them to have done all within their power to publicize their programmes in order to compensate. But this was not so. One of the most justifiable criticisms of the Schuman policy was that there was no widespread campaign to explain the European idea and the sacrifices it would entail to the French people or even to the 'omnipotent' parliament. To a

certain extent, however, this is not surprising as the local interests of the predominantly rural voters in MRP stronghold areas, such as Brittany or the mountainous areas of Catholic allegiance, were quite divorced, at least in their own minds, from European problems, and it is hard for the leadership of a party to disregard the inclinations of its strongest supporters. It is much easier to attempt to proceed quietly and not arouse public opinion too much. In order to gain a majority backing for policies such as European integration it would have been necessary for the MRP to have had the broadest possible contacts with the French nation. Yet, although the MRP represented a very broad spectrum of people, it could not make its influence sufficiently felt either by means of the press or let alone the business world. Most important, however, was the basic fact that the MRP was in essence a regional party even though its basically centralized organization belied this. Yet, "As the situation actually developed, the only really active allies of the MRP in its program of integration were to be found within Catholic groups. The party had very slim contacts with business, where there were many foes of integration; and sections of labor and the press were increasingly alienated from the MRP. Finally in some aspects of MRP foreign policy, the bureaucracy, an interest group in itself, tended to control rather than support some of the party's leaders." 12

In some ways it was an advantage for the MRP to be classified as the 'Catholic Party': there was a certain tenacity, devotion to doctrine, and party loyalty within the MRP that may have been related to the religiosity of its members. But there was a general political disadvantage for the MRP in being identified as the Catholic party. France is Catholic on the surface, but there are relatively few practicing Catholics in France. Anti-clericalism is a strong political force,

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12 R. B. Capelle, *The MRP and French Foreign Policy*, P. 36.

especially in the Radical Socialist and Socialist parties, as well as the Communist Party, of course. The MRP had sought uniqueness by calling itself not only a movement but also 'the party of the Fourth Republic', but it was given an unsolicited and unwanted unique position when many identified it as the Catholic party. In order for the MRP to accomplish its purpose in a foreign policy as dynamic as its plan for European integration, as delicate as the problem of relations with Russia and the U.S., and as difficult as its policy toward the French Union and North Africa, the party needed many supporters. It is true that the MRP was at the centre of a series of active groups in the Catholic orbit, but besides having the disadvantages of being a regional party, it lacked proper contacts with business and was progressively losing contact with labour and the press during the period under consideration. It should be noted, however, that those were handicaps and not necessarily discredits. Despite the 1951 Le Monde incident, the MRP seemed to stay clear of the venal connections with the press that were typical of some French political parties. And, except for aspects of the North African affair, the slim contacts of the MRP with business meant that the party was not willing to cater for the special interests of this segment of French society at the expense of its long-term programme of European integration.

"Although many Europeans left religion at home when they talked about the integration of Europe, unfortunately for the MRP, its anti-clerical opponents neither allowed the party to leave religion at home nor the religious issue to lie dormant at home. Although Blum and Guesde, leaders of the Socialists, had attacked the spirit of anti-clericalism, the MRP-Socialist alliance that existed up to 1950 soon became strained over the issue. And the Socialists were not the only opponents of the MRP in this respect. The anti-clerical Radical Socialists had also taken a harsh stand against the MRP as early as September, 1950, because of the party's alleged intransigency on

educational reform and the church-school issue. Nearly half of the MRP parliamentary group after the 1951 elections came from departments where the issue of church-state relations was paramount. This had a fundamental effect upon the general voting behaviour of representatives in parliament." 13 The MRP was trying to exist where, even if it were not impossible to survive, its existence was an embarrassment not only to those it had to ally with but also to itself. Unlike Germany or Italy, France was not emerging freshly from self-imposed totalitarian rule and the rejection by Conservatives of the old order was somewhat a sop to decency and therefore only temporary. Besides within France a majority of the electorate was not opposed to the Church. It is possible to argue therefore that there was no need for a Christian Democratic party in a country that was as inherently Christian Democratic as was France at this period.

MRP statements on its position with regard to the Union Française and Europe "ne traduisent pas seulement une conviction. Elles répondent aussi à un souci tactique; il ne faut pas que le MRP apparaisse comme obnubilé par l'Europe, comme disposé à sacrifier la présence française hors d'Europe à l'unification de celle-ci. L'Union Française constitue, dans une mesure appréciable, une préoccupation - alibi. Le plus curieux est que le ferveur européenne résulte elle-même d'une sorte de transfert: ayant glissé vers le conservatisme en politique intérieure, le parti retrouve une justification à son nom de "mouvement" dans l'idée d'une rénovation de la société internationale en Europe. En fin de compte, on en revient ainsi à manifester la volonté de transformer la société politique nationale puisque l'Europe, une fois constituée, doit fournir les solutions des problèmes économiques et sociaux qui se posent dans les pays qu'elle s'unifiera." 14

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13 R. B. Capelle, *The MRP and French Foreign Policy*, P.17.

14 A. Grosser, *La IVe République et sa politique extérieure*, P.125.

The 'Plan Schuman' was a very effective first step towards solving the German problem as coal and steel were, almost inevitably, at the centre of all the discussions a' propos Germany. In a sense the political organization of Europe would not only be able to be born from, but almost had to be an institution built on coal and steel, as without widening the basis of the agreement and without creating a political authority the ECSC would remain dangerously isolated and would thereby lose most of its meaning.

"The principal purpose of the MRP program of European integration was to solve the difficult German problem. The party sought to convince France in particular and Western Germany in general that a greater security could be achieved through the construction of a 'Europe'. In this way, the party related its program of integration to what had at times approximated an almost pathological French search for security. In supporting the Schuman Plan, the MRP emphasized that two objectives could be achieved, one political and one economic. Europe would be freed of the old feud between France and Germany. At the same time the incrustations of France's national economy would be sloughed off, and the level of living would be raised in France as well as elsewhere." 15

It is possible that the reason for the lack of attention to such matters as European integration and relations with the French Union and Africa might be found in the relative unanimity of the MRP on foreign policy and were therefore not considered worthy of much attention at the annual National Congresses. Then again this relative disregard for foreign policy by the MRP, claiming as it did a unique 'European vocation' seemed to be a reflection of what has been referred to as the incredible indifference of the French people to foreign affairs. Whatever, the problem was compounded by the lack of contact between the MRP and the

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15 R. B. Capelle, The MRP and French Foreign Policy, P.52.

French people. This breakdown occurred because of limited geographical areas, because of particular religious inclinations, and because of the centralized character of the MRP. The MRP was immobilized to such an extent that it could not generate really active and continuous enthusiasm even within its own ranks for its programme of European integration. The system helped stifle the outlets of party adherents too. In the lower echelons, not even the militants among party adherents were able to carry any appreciable weight, whether they expressed themselves through the sections, federations or National Congresses. Thus the MRP as a basic organization was a conglomeration that was awkward to use effectively in the pursuit of stated ideals. It is possible, in this light, to view the MRP as a mediocre organization. The end of Tripartisme in 1947 saw the end of cooperation between all the major political groupings and the beginning of a period which saw much ineffectual action and shadow-boxing. The MRP was almost completely caught up in the spirit of the times and, apart from the occasional streak of individual creativity, it did not send out any waves. The corporate identity it assumed was very low in profile. In a period of relative inactivity the MRP did not emerge as one of the leading lights, in spite of its programmes and its philosophy. However, this relative absence of a legislative flurry and the seemingly endless procession of ministries tends to conceal the fact that there were severe onslaughts being directed against the existing system by the 'extreme' movements - the Communists and the RPF. In all probability it was the fact of these threats that caused the particular type of immobility that occurred as the system attempted to protect itself. As an emergency measure the law of 1951 was a success: it deprived the extremists of the power they needed to wreck the government of the country. To destroy the system the cooperation of the centre parties was still necessary. "En gestation depuis près d'un an, la réforme électorale avait entraîné la chute d'un

gouvernement, celui de Pleven, et manqué de provoquer celle de son successeur M. Queuille. La réforme était d' invention démocratie-chrétienne. Il suffisait que deux ou plusieurs listes s'apparentent et obtiennent la majorité absolue de voix pour hériter de tous les sièges d' un département. Les partis "condamnés à vivre ensemble" au gouvernement avait donc un motif noble: n' était-il pas logique que la majorité parlementaire soit aussi une majorité électorale, que les partis unis au pouvoir se présente associés devant le pays? Mais au fait c' était la crainte qui aurait conduit à cette loi d' apparemment. Tout portait à croire en effet que si la représentation proportionnelle était maintenue, la future assemblée serait comme l' opinion, divisée en trois fractions sensiblement égales: les communistes, les gaullistes et l'entre-deux, c'est-à-dire la troisième force. Aucun de ces trois camps n'ayant à lui seul la majorité ne pourrait ni gouverner, ni s'entendre avec un autre, sinon pour barrer la troisième. Le mécanisme constitutionnel serait enrayé et le seul moyen était de valoriser artificiellement l'un des trois camps au détriment des deux autres. S' estimant en état de légitime défense, la troisième force entendit que ce camp-là fut le sien et elle assembla ses éléments disparates sur le seul thème qui leur fut commun: la démocratie parlementaire." 16 In effect, as far as the MRP was concerned, the electoral law was a matter of political survival not only of itself but also of the other 'centrist' parties, and therefore the end of the reasonably democratic French political system then in existence.

After the election the new Assembly met on the 5th of July and re-elected the President on the 10th. Pleven, however, was not invested until the 8th of August. Thus the legislature started with a new crisis, and yet a majority had emerged from the elections

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16 J. Fauvet, La IVe République, pp. 172-173.

that excluded only the Communists and the RPF. Logically it should have become the parliamentary majority and the government been in its image; these two propositions are basically inseparable as a party will not support for any considerable length of time a ministry in which it is not participating. This crisis, which served as a long introduction and as a bad omen to the new legislature appears to have had only one cause; the problem of church schools. By itself this problem would not have been enough to destroy the 'troisième force', however, the charm was broken before the majority had even settled into office and this bode ill for the future.

Mollet, a Socialist, asked for the nationalization of education after the election; but his party was on the defensive and therefore was inclined more to attempt to preserve the status quo rather than to attempt to achieve its demands for the complete dismantlement of the private schools apparatus. The MRP, on the other hand, invited Parliament to "assurer sans délai la liberté réelle de l'enseignement. Il n'est donc pas juste d'imputer le réveil de la querelle à la seule droite - qui n'a jamais fait que suivre le MRP en ce domaine, ni au seul RPF qui l'avait précédé en lançant à grand fracas son projet d'allocation-éducation. Par conviction, intérêt ou tactique, le MRP a posé le pavé au seuil même de la nouvelle Assemblée. En réglant le problème dès le départ, il pensait débarrasser de l'obstacle la route de la majorité et que l'épreuve passée, cette majorité serait plus libre de ses mouvements." <sup>17</sup> History proved them wrong and the MRP found itself forced into a position it originally did not intend to occupy.

The years 1950 and 1951 saw in French politics the effective triumph of 'immobilisme', all attempts to put the régime back on the

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17 J. Fauvet, *La IVe République*, pp. 182-183.

18 J. Fauvet, *La Deuxième République*, pp. 105-106.



paths of action failed. Bidault attempted to introduce elements of authority and strength, and was broken as a result. Bidault, however, did not leave in disgrace; he was the only prime minister to leave power in the proper constitutional manner. He did not hide behind votes of confidence and flee when he was threatened; he left when he was beaten. After him came Pleven, who tried to gain the initiative but succeeded in solving neither the school question, nor in revising the Constitution, nor in reforming the electoral law. During this period no real solutions were found to the major contemporary problems, although in some instances a beginning was made. All would have been well had the world remained 'immobile' as well, but such was not the case. In France meanwhile there was not one majority which would be able to take a stand on all the different issues, rather there was one majority per problem, and one solution per government. "Le défaut d'unité géographique, sociologique ou même intellectuelle des diverses tendances politiques n'a pas seulement pour effet d'opposer les partis les uns aux autres; il divise chacun d'eux contre lui-même. Les grandes querelles contemporaines ont déchiré chaque famille d'esprit. Il en a été ainsi des mythes ou des réalités de Munich ou de Vichy, du drame de la C.E.D. ou de la guerre d'Algérie. Car chaque parti ou presque a ses ouvriers et ses bourgeois, ses ruraux et ses citadins, ses nostalgiques du passé et ses curieux de l'avenir, ses méridionaux et ses nordiques, ses hommes de droite et ses hommes de gauche. Chaque parti est à sa manière une petite France." 18

Whatever the political importance of the MRP in general, it does not seem to have contributed very much at all to the political impact of the ecclesiastical nucleus at the hub of French Catholicism. Perhaps the main impact was negative: the existence of the MRP as a



CHAPTER IITHE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OFTHE 1951 ELECTORAL LAW ANDTHE GENERAL ELECTION OF JUNE 17, 1951

In the 1951 Assembly out of a total of 627 deputies, 83 (including Algerians) were overseas deputies. It is interesting to ponder upon the degree mandates for action could be claimed by governments based on shifting and partly fortuitous coalitions, dependent perhaps for majorities on the votes of the overseas deputies whose primary concern was hardly likely to be a well-thought-out programme for the general good of Metropolitan France - although it is debatable to what extent a number of the deputies of Metropolitan France itself applied themselves to this goal, particularly when it meant that their constituencies would suffer, or, at least, not benefit from it. There were also the problems created by the coalitions between the parties of the Third Force - the grouping of those parties that can be clustered under the loose label of 'centrist' - coalitions that were flimsy and internally divided to such an extent that their life-expectancies were not long.

In such a situation it would be expected that there be a certain amount of cynicism on the part of Frenchmen with regards to their governments; but such an attitude does not appear to have been reflected in their political behaviour during the first decade of the Fourth Republic. In the election for the Assembly in November 1946 (a year of 2 elections and 2 referenda) 78.5% of the electorate went to the polls, and in 1951 81.2% did so. Georges Bidault commented on the contemporary scene that "... public life, especially electoral campaigns (had) an artificial, archaic and often sordid character. But in spite of it all, France was gradually becoming prosperous again. Behind the petty and disorderly facade, order was being re-established, production was increasing, employers and salaried workers were slowly beginning to have confidence in the future. These concrete results

got little publicity; only the hordes of detractors were heard. One reason for the improvement was the stability of the French civil service. Our institutions were perhaps flimsy; but at least they existed. Administration was good, the State Council was respected and our law courts were respectable. Our army was discontented, but it had been modernized." <sup>1</sup> There still seems to be a case for saying that the lack of intermediate elements of cohesion in society - whatever form they may take, and strong local institutions are only one possibility among many - will tend to make the state either too strong or too weak. The French would, on average, definitely prefer the latter, tempering a nominal impersonal centralization by the impact of countless selfish and partisan pressures. In a period when the alternative was often one form of totalitarianism or another, the choice was neither unintelligent nor dishonourable. Nor was it fatal.

One undoubted result of the fall of France and the Vichy interlude had been to give elements among French Catholics a new impetus to find a bridge between their faith and the needs of contemporary society - particularly that urban industrial society, for the most part long-estranged from the church. This impetus took varied forms ranging from the idea of Communists and Catholics working in a movement to better working-class conditions (re-christianizing the worker through missionary activity by "worker-priests" - a movement which the Vatican cut short as incompatible with the worker-priest's spiritual functions), to the idea of replacing the small Catholic-democratic groups of the Third Republic with a new major party devoted to the Church, but definitely on the left in its social and economic programme. This, however, created a dilemma as the MRP, as the Catholic party, drew its electoral strength predominantly from the strongly Catholic and conservative

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<sup>1</sup> G. Bidault, *Resistance*, p.171.

departments of eastern and western France, and that outside these it was suspect, as a party approved by the Church. Thus it was very difficult, to be a 'Catholic' party as well as a 'leftist' one. To a certain extent, however, this problem was alleviated by the events up to 1951 and also by the outcome of the 1951 election which, owing to a challenge to the MRP by the reconstituted Right, meant that, in part at least, those who voted for the MRP in that year were on average basically more purely Christian democrat than had previously been the case. Possibly the major consequence of this was that the movement became more a party than a movement and proceeded as a more disciplined body, mainly because there was greater internal consensus.

As early as the two first Assemblies of the Fourth Republic it emerged clearly that the political parties had not developed into the homogeneous and disciplined formations which some had hoped and some had feared would be the fruit of the adoption of proportional representation. The whole tendency of the country's politicians, fortified by the opportunities which the procedures of the legislative body gave to the private member against the ministry, worked in the contrary direction. Given the strength of the local roots of political personalities party excommunication was not political death in parties other than the Communist party. Because the parties were weak, local strength was what mattered to the politician. Because administration was centralized, what interested the electors was to a large extent the nature of decisions made at the centre. Even when the department rather than the single-member constituency became the unit, the elector continued to regard his deputy very much as an ambassador to the government on behalf of local interests.

The efforts of the MRP to change the political attitudes of those social groups, generally impregnated with Catholicism, who before the war had supported the conservative parties was not crowned with success.

The MRP tried to inculcate them with a larger conception of the "common good", by persuading them to accept the prospect of a sweeping reform of the traditional structure of French society. The ease with which the voters who had supported the MRP in 1945 and 1946 abandoned it in 1947, not only for the RPF (which, after all, expressed at least politically, if not socially, a desire for reform) but for the conservatives, Moderates or Radicals who exploited de Gaulle's name, demonstrated that the attitudes of these people had not really changed after the Liberation. They had supported the MRP for lack of something better, because it seemed to them to be able to check Communism, but they had never really supported either the programme or the doctrine of the party for which they voted. The MRP's electoral decline after 1946 suggests that a large part of the French public was returning to an economically and socially conservative attitude.

Most people who became MRP members or who voted MRP did so because of religious factors in the main. People joined the MRP to be in the 'family' as it were, among fellow social Catholics and Christian Democrats working in the political sphere. This was the basic factor that differentiated the MRP from other parties: if there had been no 'French Catholicism' there would still have been an Independent and a Gaullist party - but the MRP would not have existed. There were, however, social Catholics in other parties - in the PRL, the RPF, the UDSR and even in the Socialist Party - although whether these Catholics in parties other than the MRP really found them satisfactory prolongations of their religious principles or not is debatable. Conversely, the MRP's clientele included practically no non-Catholics. It would appear that the number of practising Catholics favouring the MRP was actually higher than the number of votes which the MRP received in 1951, and an opinion poll conducted in 1952 showed impressively how 'clerical' the MRP's supporters really were. The MRP inherited from its religious forbears a spiritualism that would have been able to put it

on the Right in the classic division of political tendencies. At the same time many of its Christian Democratic political opinions tied it to the Left. There was a considerable and constant tension between the two orientations, and the MRP consequently found itself ill at ease in either camp. It was one of the pillars of the régime and the defender of the family, but it did not constitute a cement since no majority of the centre parties could be constituted either with them or without them. This political ambiguity and the unstable political position of the MRP appear to have had basically religious causes. However, many of the specific activities of the MRP were frankly pragmatic, and could in no way be attributed to its Catholic inspiration, even though the MRP on occasion did use its spiritualist based doctrine to justify certain actions.

The MRP's party constitution had been designed so as to strengthen the party leadership, though it could not always avoid conflicts or even win them. In general the MRP applied formal rules less strictly than other parties. After August 1948, when twenty MRP deputies refused to support Paul Reynaud's conservative economic policy, the party often had dissenters of both Right and Left. But strong bonds held it together: its members shared a common religious faith, a common political experience in the pre-war and Resistance generation, and the sense of a mission to reconcile the Church with the Republic. Internal divisions consequently did less harm to the MRP than to other parties. But though by the time of the 1951 election the 'discipline de vote' was only a memory in the MRP, its deputies prided themselves on a cohesion based on loyalty to the movement rather than fear of sanctions. They rarely carried their differences with the party beyond abstention to a hostile vote. Their indiscipline was associated less with specific ministries and more with problems of principle, often personal and specific.

"Le système de la troisième force ne réalisait une majorité de gouvernement que par le jeu d'une double résistance, à gauche et à droite, aboutissant à la constitution d'un centre. Les deux partis qui formaient le double pilier du système, MRP et SFIO, n' étaient d' accord que sur un commun penchant vers une politique sociale et économique de dirigisme. Ils ne l' étaient plus s'il s'agissait de la politique laïque selon l' esprit du régime précédent. Les deux partis se divisait alors, l' un attiré à gauche, l' autre à droite. Une complication supplémentaire naissait du fait que les deux formations parlementaires n' étaient pas assez nombreuses à elles seules pour faire une majorité: l' appoint d' éléments radicaux ou modérés demeurait indispensable. Et, là encore, il y avait division, car on n' était d' accord que sur un libéralisme anti-dirigiste, mais non uniformément sur le laïcisme. Si la majorité étroite se divisait par exemple sur l' école, la majorité élargie se divisait, elle, sur la conception de l' état et la limite de ses interventions. Si, en dépit de l' instabilité ministérielle, un système de majorité en somme durable réussissait quand même à s' établir avec stabilité de la politique suivie, c' est parce que le danger d' une opposition au régime, s' imposait à tout instant, soit de la part des communistes, soit de la part du Rassemblement du peuple français. On arrivait à maintenir un gouvernement parce qu' il fallait, par simple instinct élémentaire de survivre." 2

It appeared more and more clearly to the parties of the majority that maintaining the electoral system of 1946 might be unfavourable for them. The advantages that the system of 1946 gave to the large parties would benefit the two parties of the opposition, the Communist party and the RPF, and harm the four Centre groups because of the very

2 L' Année Politique, 1951, p.VIII.



fact that there were four of them. The proportional principle itself might result in the election of an ungovernable assembly if each of the two extreme parties won about one-fourth of the votes. The interests of the government parties lay, therefore, in adopting an electoral system which would permit them, in one way or another, to bolster one another in the balloting. This required giving certain advantages to a group that could win a relative majority, which the Centre parties could do by combining their popular vote. "The parties of the majority - the Socialists, the Popular Republicans, the Radicals and the Moderates who were sympathetic to the government - and even some of the Moderates and Radicals who were in the opposition but not subservient to the RPF, had no difficulty in agreeing on the goals of a change in the electoral system. These were to reduce the number of deputies of the isolated parties, which meant certainly the Communist party and eventually the RPF; to make it possible for neighbouring parties to ally with one another; and to introduce the majority principle. The last point was designed to enable a coalition which might win more votes than either of the opposition parties to win a majority of seats in the Assembly even if the coalition won less than half the total votes cast." 3

The first five years of the Fourth Republic are crucial in any study of the MRP's electoral performance for between 1946 and 1951 the MRP's vote fluctuated considerably. Thereafter the percentage of votes cast for the party settled down to about 11% until the General Election of 1962. The General Election of 1946 favoured the MRP inordinately compared to the party's real appeal owing to the situation of the day. In 1947 the RPF was founded by de Gaulle and the Right once again became respectable. By 1947 the MRP was in danger of becoming no more than a pressure group associated to the Church, at least judging by the results of the local elections held in that year. It became imperative, from the point

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3 F. Goguel, *France Under The Fourth Republic*, pp. 67-68.

of view of the MRP, that the electoral system should be biased in its favour, or at least should not favour the two major, extreme parties.

Electoral reform had a difficult passage among the reefs of conflicting party interests, second preferences, and minority opinions. The MRP alone among the centre parties stood in favour of proportional representation, and was eventually driven to compromise in order to escape unpopularity and an ungovernable, Gaullist-dominated Assembly. However, even more than that, the prospect of the second ballot worried the MRP. Its determination not to include this as part of the new system eventually caused the reluctant Radicals and the indifferent or divided, Socialists and Conservatives to compromise as well, and to settle for a complicated, basically proportional representative type of system with no second ballot. As Rémy Roure said in the Monde of 26 April 1951, it was 'the least honest electoral law in French history'.

"The new law was similar in principle though not in method to that of 1919. It amended and did not repeal the PR law of 1946, keeping the same constituencies (except that Gironde was divided), the same system of party lists with a candidate for every seat, and the same illusory preferential vote. But panachage was now allowed; by-elections, abolished in 1945, were restored; and though in theory seats were still distributed by PR, two new provisions transformed the working of the system: apparentements and the absolute majority rule. Everywhere outside the Paris area lists could form an alliance or apparentement, and their votes were then counted together as if cast for a single list, (in order to be able to ally with another party it was necessary that a party be deemed to be a 'national' party, in other words that it present candidates in at least thirty departments. In 1951 eleven parties qualified, some of them (and many of their lists) were bogus. The Paris area had a form of PR which helped the weaker parties, depriving the RPF and the CP of nine seats in 1951). Any

list or alliance which won an absolute majority of votes took every seat. PR was still used to distribute seats both within an alliance, and generally when no one won an absolute majority of votes. This system enabled the government parties to combine and so gain the advantage of size which in 1945-46 went to the 'big three' and in 1951 would otherwise have gone to the two oppositions. Moreover, the combined Centre might win an absolute majority, and could therefore attract citizens wanting to 'vote usefully'. Government supporters argued that a vote for RPF was a vote for the Communists." 4. It seemed likely that in most provincial constituencies the RPF and the Communists would be weaker than in the Paris region, and that the total poll of the centre parties would often exceed half the votes cast. Therefore in these constituencies the system of 1946 was retained, subject to certain drastic changes. In each constituency alliances could be made between 'national' parties. If in any provincial constituency an isolated list or an alliance of lists gained an absolute majority of the votes cast, then that list or alliance won all the seats; if the absolute majority had been won by an alliance, the seats were distributed among the allied lists by the system of the highest average. If no list or alliance won an absolute majority of the votes, then the seats were distributed among all the competing alliances and isolated lists by the system of the highest average; in this distribution the votes for each alliance would be taken together to determine the number of seats won by the alliance, and then those seats would be distributed among the allies by the system of the highest average. No seat could be allocated to an isolated or allied list whose votes were fewer in number than five percent of the total number of electors casting votes in the constituency.

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4. P. M. Williams, *Crisis and Compromise*, p. 313.

In theory, the requirement that only 'national' parties could ally themselves, one to another, could have encouraged parties to associate on the basis of some minimum programme. In fact, nothing of the kind happened. Under the provisions of the May 9, 1951 electoral law the allied parties were not obliged to combine their programmes. The elector was unable to vote for a Government per se as Governments were the outcome only of post-election bargaining. The electoral law was, in a sense an emergency law, designed to save parliamentary democracy. Because of the perpetuance of democracy by the continued acceptance of the political existence of those parties which provided the threat to parliamentary democracy, those parties of the centre that stood for democracy endangered their own existence, and that of the system they stood for. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the case, the method chosen did in fact succeed in attaining its end, as the Communist and Gaullist representation in the second Parliament was not such as to make parliamentary government impossible. The Radicals, the Conservatives and the MRP gained most from the new system; the Socialists gained less as they entered into fewer centre combinations. The RPF could have made alliances, but its leader preferred, nearly everywhere, independence, even though it cost him a few seats. The Communists were isolated throughout the country and lost heavily as a result of the new law. The two opposition parties

The results of the 1951 election showed a severe defeat for the had between them just under one-half of the votes; it has been calculated that the old system would have given them over one-half of the seats. The MRP lost almost a half of its five million voters of 1946, and of the few and a half million Socialist voters only three

The overt aim of the system of alliances was to protect parliamentary democracy against the two extreme parties which menaced it. Its great fault was that it created among the parties which counted on profiting from it a solidarity that was purely negative. These

parties were agreed on opposing the Gaullists and the Communists, but

they agreed on nothing positive; worst of all was the fact that the law allowed the centre parties to do this without requiring them to make the conciliatory efforts necessary for the elaboration of a single programme. This allowed alliances such as those between the Popular Republicans who advocated subsidies for church schools and the anti-clerical Socialists, so that even though each party was defending contradictory principles each party was benefiting from their agreement on the general nature of the political system and hence from the votes cast for one and the other. "The combining of the votes received by allied lists is an abstract operation, done a posteriori, which has no basis in reality. It is inevitable that the public should regard the results as unjust, even if it recognizes the effectiveness of the procedures.... It must be recognized, however, that this law to a large extent corresponded to the necessities of the political situation as it had developed since 1947.... The diverse elements of the majority differed on the major problems of economic, social, financial, and religious policy. The basic and most troublesome aspect of the electoral problem was the division of French opinion into several sectors, none of which could gain the support of a clear majority. To this problem the law of May 9, 1951, gave an expedient solution which was more apparent than real." 5

The results of the 1951 election showed a severe defeat for the two parties most responsible for creating and governing the Fourth Republic. The MRP lost almost a half of its five million voters of 1946, and of the four and a half million Socialist voters only three million were left. The Communist strength remained almost unimpaired; they received five million votes. The Conservatives and the RGR - the Radicals and their allies - retained nearly all their supporters,

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5 F. Goguel, *France Under the Fourth Republic*, pp. 77-78.

two and a half and two million respectively. The RPF, (which, of course had not existed in 1946) won four million votes. Some came from conservative-minded electors who had switched from the MRP to General de Gaulle when the former made too many compromises with the Communists. Others were voters from the older parties whose candidates had thought it advantageous to climb on the Gaullist bandwagon, often only to jump off again shortly after - French politics being largely opportunistic, both at the individual and party level, at this time. "The election of June 17, 1951, therefore, was distinguished by no decisive shift in opinion either from what it had been during the Third Republic or from what it had been during the first years of the Fourth. One must, however, point out the constant reduction, from October 1945 to June 1951, in the percentage of votes received by the two Marxist parties, the Communist party and the Socialist party: from 38.8% in October 1945 this percentage declined to 35.5% in November 1946. It was only 31.4% in June 1951, which almost brings it down to the 1936 level of 28.9%. In this sense one can say that the election of 1951 was marked by a rather pronounced movement to the Right, the majority of voters appearing to be definitely opposed to the principle of a collectivist economy, although there was no majority in favor of an orthodox liberal economy either." 6 Also now that the old Right and the conservatives generally were no longer worried by the recent past (they had given the Vichy Regime and all the accompanying phenomena an appropriate period of mourning, and had exonerated themselves, to a certain extent by voting for the MRP during the first few years of the Fourth Republic), and besides they were also given a lead, and an example, by the formation of the RPF by General de Gaulle, they felt able to separate themselves from the MRP and to create parties that were more suited to their political opinions.

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6 F. Goguel, *France Under the Fourth Republic*, pp. 92-93.

The MRP lost a half of their 1946 votes on June 17. This was a serious setback, but the net result was satisfactory. In the 1947 municipal elections the MRP had lost, in the cities, almost three-quarters of its voters of the previous fall, and had done even worse in the countryside. The MRP, therefore, won back between 1947 and 1951 about one third of the votes it had lost between 1946 and 1947. Its voters now also formed a much more homogeneous area of opinion than was the case in 1945 and 1946. The MRP, in effect, no longer profited from the premium that goes to the large parties, many of its previous voters considering that to give it their vote in 1951 would be a comparative waste. It was as the representatives of Christian Democracy in the political and in the social senses of the term, that the MRP received the support of a significant portion of the electorate, which shared to a greater degree than it did in 1945 and 1946 the preoccupations and sentiments of the leaders and the militants of the party for which it voted. Nonetheless, to a certain extent, "le "parti de la fidélité" a payé avec usure son infidélité, non point que le pays se découvre de nouveau une vocation "gaulliste". Mais il lui faut toujours un péril et quelqu' un qui le rassure ou le protège. Contre le communisme, le dirigisme, le RPF a pris la faction à la place du MRP, il lui a pris aussi ses armes: la défense de l' école libre. Bref, ses voix de droite qui flotte selon l' air du temps et la direction des vents se sont d' autant plus fixées sur les listes rassurantes des gaullistes qu' ils ont bien souvent le visage des modérés." 7

Although it was stronger than its predecessor, the Popular Democratic Party, was during the Third Republic, and although its strength was more widespread, the MRP was really strong only in certain limited regions of the country, and after the 1951 election it was more obviously

ce sont pas des gaullistes à proprement parler, mais des modérés.

sur environ du centre droit, une résistance gaulliste aux extrêmes  
7 J. Favet, La IVe République, p. 175.

a 'Catholic' party than before. The geographical distribution of the MRP's supporters evidenced a compression. Of the nineteen constituencies where the MRP polled more than fifteen percent of the votes cast, seven were located in the area of Brittany and four were in the East - and they were all areas in which religious practice was strong among the rural population. Catholicism does not appear to have been the only factor in the strength of the MRP as, for instance, the party was stronger in the predominantly non-religious department of Jura than in faithful Doubs. The distribution of the isolated departments where the MRP remained strong showed that the party had become neither purely confessional nor purely regional, as the Popular Democratic Party had become before the war. Nonetheless the results of 17 June showed a distinct tendency in this direction.

Numerical victory by the centre parties was merely the first round. The parties still had to prove themselves capable of using their victory to achieve strong and stable government. It was evident from the start that agreement between the majority parties would be reached only as a result of some difficult to achieve compromises. In the outgoing Assembly there had been only one workable majority - a combination of the Third Force parties. In the new Assembly, the Third Force no longer had a majority. It was flanked by a strong conservative 'Fourth Force'. The parliamentary configuration was no longer tripartite but hexagonal, and the majority parties, though no less condemned to hang together for fear of hanging separately, found the task infinitely more complicated with a parliamentary centre of gravity perceptibly further to the Right. "A l' intérieur de la majorité, quelque précaire qu'elle soit, des regroupements et des déplacements du centre de gravité se dessinent. Si les laïcisans ne sont pas disposés à céder à ce nouvel "esprit nouvel", il y a aussi aux environs du centre droit, une résistance grandissante aux prétentions



dirigistes. Le parti radical, de même que l'UDSR, est libéral économiquement. Si l'on tient compte en outre des divers groupes modérés, il est en train de se former un pôle d'attraction, non pas réactionnaire mais décidément conservateur. Au mieux, dans ces conditions, un gouvernement ne peut se maintenir qu'avec des majorités de rechange, en portant, suivant la formule de Charles Dupuy l'arme tantôt sur l'épaule gauche et tantôt sur l'épaule droite. Il faut pour cela des virtuoses..." 8 In the midst of this situation moved a reduced MRP, a party which, although it had less support than it had gained in previous general elections, played a very difficult rôle that was as important, and perhaps even more important than was the case before the election.

In the Fourth Republic a second pivot party emerged; the MRP, which proved as indispensable to every majority as the Radicals. In spite of this vital position, however, the MRP's members differed often from their partners on most of the major problems of policy - from colonialism to education, and from foreign policy to the electoral system - and in their basic outlook as Catholics and not as free-thinkers; moralists and not men of the world; resisters and not attentistes, men aware of the social problems of the working-classes, which the Radicals neglected. The main internal paradoxes of the MRP were, firstly, its hostility to the Third Republic but for many of whose traits they actually hankered and, secondly, its favourable attitude to the party discipline they detested. Gradually the MRP made more and more concessions to its partners and came to abandon, eventually, much of its crusading zeal. Its members who were least willing to compromise went over to the RPF, the Catholic Left, or like Georges Bidault in 1958, the extreme Right. This, of course, made electoral interest in defeating both the Radicals and the Communists.

8 L'Année Politique, 1951 p. X.

the party more homogeneous but it did also mean that it was going to be less able to compromise because it did represent a more clearly defined set of opinions. The MRP appeared as a typical centre party, a party which could not break completely with either the right or the left. It could not accept any modification of the principle of the social and economic reform of the Liberation without breaking with Socialism and opening the way to a reconstitution of the old right-wing bloc. But it was also not sure that it would succeed at the same time in making the Socialists accept certain technical measures for the necessary improvement of these reforms, and in assuring the Radicals and Moderates that it had not gone too far. This was a difficult situation but one that was decisive in maintaining political stability. The numerical strength, the doctrinal originality and the freshness of the MRP's programme meant that it would remain, for a time at least, one of the essential elements of French political life.

"The election results gave the coalition of the four centre groups a majority. Were this coalition to have succeeded in maintaining its cohesiveness, the Assembly would have produced a strong governing majority, opposed by two parties large enough to make their views prevail. There existed the necessary conditions for the proper operation of the parliamentary system. In order to have accomplished that, however, the four parties of the majority would have had to have had a common governmental program. The major defect of the 1951 electoral law was that it did nothing to compel these parties to harmonize their points of view and to come to such a compromise. The electoral law created among them a solidarity that was purely negative, based only on their common, but temporary, electoral interest in defeating both the Gaullists and the Communists.

Immediately after the election there were good reasons for fearing that the new Assembly would be able to produce a real governing majority only with great difficulty. The fear was substantiated quickly, during the debates of the first session which opened on July 5 and continued until September 25, 1951." 9

Even the most... regions alike... there it was the only political... period... or... combined... Parliament for a... community... Socialists, Radicals and... Communists and Gaullists... interests and... Socialists and Communists... RIF were hostile to its views... its friends (or competitors)... all Socialists... And in Europe it agreed... opposed Communists and RIF... a situation put... other temporary...

In 1956... came at the end of a long series of struggles between the Council...

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9 F. Goguel, France Under The Fourth Republic p. 120.

10 J. K. Williams, Crisis and Continuity, 1953.

CHAPTER III

THE DILEMMA OF THE MRP:

AS ILLUSTRATED BY THE 1951 ISSUE

OF STATE AID TO PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Even the least ideologically-minded politician knew that in some regions laïcité was still the real electoral dividing line; here and there it was the only political problem on which voters' views corresponded closely with their party sympathies. Since politics turned on several different conflicts instead of one, however, there was a coherent majority neither in the country for a single party nor in Parliament for a lasting coalition. Associates on one issue were not uncommonly bitter opponents on others. "MRP for example worked with Socialists, Radicals and Conservatives in defending the régime against Communists and Gaullists. On matters involving working-class interests and sometimes on colonial questions it sympathized with the Socialists and Communists; Radicals, Conservatives and (until 1951) RPF were hostile to its views. But over church schools MRP found its friends (or competitors) among Gaullists and Conservatives, while all Socialists and most Radicals joined the Communists against it. And on Europe it agreed with most Conservatives and Socialists and opposed Communists and RPF, with the Radicals split. So complicated a situation put a high premium on the arts of manoeuvre and facilitated other temporary combinations." <sup>1</sup>

In 1886 Jules Ferry secularized public primary education. This came at the end of a long series of struggles between the Church, in alliance with the monarchists, and the republicans. The secular-

<sup>1</sup> P. M. Williams, *Crisis and Compromise*, p.29.

ization was seen as a symbolic victory for the republicans, particularly as it was self-consolidating to a certain extent because the training of future citizens was being taken away from the influence of the Church. The principle that no aid for private schools was to come from public funds soon established itself among the precepts of those of left-wing opinion, and this served only to increase the hostility of the Church. The fact that the Vichy government had granted subsidies to the private schools naturally enhanced even further the symbolic significance of the old legislation which Vichy had abrogated and which was restored in 1945. Religiosity and the religious problem varied in importance in different parts of France. Nonetheless of the total school population in France in the early years of the Fourth Republic, thirty percent were educated in schools entirely unsupported by the State (mostly Roman Catholic schools), while the remaining seventy percent received free education in State schools. In the case of primary education in the school year of 1949-50 some 4,220,000 pupils attended State schools as against 910,000 educated at private schools whilst in the case of secondary education approximately 412,000 attended State schools and 308,500 attended private schools. The largest proportion of children attending Church or other private primary schools was to be found in Western France, especially Brittany, and in the south-eastern districts of the Massif Central, where private schools accounted for over fifty percent of the pupils. It is interesting, however, that in some areas, for instance, Lorraine, Franche-Comté and Savoie, less than fifteen percent of the children attended private schools, and yet this happened because of quality of the schools. This showed that, except in the few areas, where there was a high attendance at private schools, the public schools no longer aroused the fears that had been current at the turn of the century. The education given in the public schools was basically non-religious, but not antireligious, and it did not appear to the parents or even to the clergy to be a threat to the beliefs of the

children. Often when this situation arose the reason for a child attending a private school could be attributed to social rather than religious causes. On the other hand where the private schools were well attended, the public schools, born in a belligerent atmosphere, often adopted an aggressive, secular character. This, of course, merely served to perpetuate the discord and mutual resentment between the partisans of the two factions. In spite of large numbers of children attending private schools in some areas many private schools experienced acute financial difficulties owing to the increased cost of living, the decline in the incomes of the middle and upper classes, higher taxation, and the higher price of school repairs, maintenance and equipment. It was disclosed in the National Assembly in 1950 that many teachers in primary private schools were earning about one-third of the salary of teachers in State schools and far less than the salaire minimum garanti fixed by law. Since the Loi Falloux of 1850, which was regarded as the 'charter' of the free schools, freedom of education was repeatedly embodied in the Constitutional Acts of the French State, alike under the Second Empire and the Third and Fourth Republics. In raising the question of State aid to church schools right at the beginning of the Second Legislature of the Fourth Republic the MRP hoped to dispose of one of the major obstacles that stood in the way of a majority, and once past it the majority would be freer in its movements. By itself the issue was not sufficient to break the 'Third Force' but the charm was broken before the majority was, and this happened because of conflict over the schools question.

The effect of attempts to subvert the old privileged position of the Church, which reached their peak at the end of the nineteenth century was to drive many into opposition to the democracy they saw being put into practice and enforced. The consequences of this in French political life remain numerous; a striking example was the

importance that was attached to a problem such as that of the private schools. French public opinion had gradually become impressed, under the influence of socialist ideas, with the notion that strictly juridical and formal liberty would be fallacious unless there were an economic basis which would permit liberty to be realized in practice. It was this principle which instigated the reforms carried out in the social sphere between the two wars. The Catholics considered themselves justified in demanding that this theoretical liberty (including as it did the belief in freedom of education) be made effective by appropriate financial measures, that is, by governmental subsidies which would permit the private schools to pay their teachers decent salaries and not require financial sacrifices by the parents of their pupils. There was also the fact of the sharp rise in the birth rate after 1945 which was threatening to swamp the existing number of teachers and school facilities and to prevent the provision of education for all the children. In fact there could be compulsory education only because of the existence of the private schools. The Catholics therefore reasoned that as they were participating in the performance of a public service, they should be aided by the State. On another plane, the question of the survival of private schools (of which the vast number were Catholic) was of vital importance to the French Catholic Church because priests were recruited almost exclusively among the former students of private schools. Contrary to what had happened in 1946, the question of the legal, and financial, status and condition of the Catholic schools was raised during the campaign for the 1951 general election by the RPF, the Independents, the MRP, and, in two or three departments, the RGR. These groups all insisted that the Catholic schools should be aided by public funds, which after all were contributed to by parents whose children were sent to private schools at their own expense. On the other hand, the orthodox Radicals and the Socialists declared their

fidelity to the traditional idea of the separation of church and state, which precluded such subsidies. Naturally the Communists tried to exploit this dissension between allied parties in order to win the support of the anti-clerical voters.

"From 1947 to 1951, the Socialists and the Popular Republicans constituted the largest fraction of the Center majority. They had had to make serious concessions to the RGR and to the Moderates, and bore a special responsibility because of their numbers. After the June election, the greatly increased importance of the liberal elements of the Center seemed to transfer this responsibility to them." 2

However the coalition was divided and it was only many weeks after the election that a Government was invested under M. René Plevin on the eighth of August. The major problems were: the struggle between opposing economic views - those of the Moderate and the Radical parties which were partisans of laissez-faire capitalism, and the Socialists and the MRP, who defended a policy of control of economic activity by the state and of systematic support of the interests of the wage earners, (the Communist views were not a real factor here except because of the strength of the Communist voting power; but the RPF was a temptation for some of the Moderates); the other problem was in the religious sphere and this was far more serious for the MRP. To the measures that the majority of the Assembly was to introduce and legislate in favour of free schools, the MRP had to try to impart just such a stamp as not to force the Socialists, passionate defenders of secularism, into irreconcilable opposition. The task was not easy, or entirely successful, and was complicated by the social side of the MRP's Christian Democratic views, which were hard to reconcile with the traditional position of a 'Catholic' party; this was the dilemma that

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2 F. Goguel, France Under The Fourth Republic, p.122.



faced the MRP and which it was impossible to avoid because of the past and the position adopted by the MRP as a 'modern' socialist oriented party.

"The division of the advocates of subsidies to private schools between the RPF and the Center coalition made it inevitable that the question would quickly be raised before the National Assembly. Each of the two groups was afraid that the other would try to attract its voters by taking the initiative in changing the secular school laws. The fear of each group that it would be outbid by the other caused the school question to be raised in Parliament before the Paul-Boncour committee had arrived at its conclusions. Furthermore, the fact that the Socialists wanted to break with their liberal partners in the Center coalition over economic policy made it certain, in advance, that they would be uncompromising in their defense of the traditional conception of secularism, because that would enable them to shift to their former allies the responsibility for the dislocation of the majority." 3

It soon became apparent that there was going to be an impasse over the creation of a Government of the Centre. The Moderates and the MRP proposed that the future Premier agree not to oppose any proposals initiated by Parliament for the purpose of giving provisional aid to the private schools, pending the Paul-Boncour committee report. It was hoped by this to make it possible for a proclerical majority in the Assembly to settle the school question without dislocating the majority. The Socialists and some of the Radicals, however, made their support of any Centre government conditional upon their being free to vote as they would. Mainly because of disagreements over the state aid to private schools question M. René Mayer failed to gain the support of an absolute majority of the members of the National Assembly and he had to abandon his attempts to form a government. M. Maurice Petsche

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3 F. Goguel, *France Under The Fourth Republic*, p. 129.

was the next to attempt to form a ministry. He presented the school question as a matter of social justice and proposed the establishment of a central fund to bolster up those professional persons' wages which were below the guaranteed minimum. This would have had too many extraneous effects, however, and was recognized by some as being an attempt to circumambulate the issue and Petsche too failed to receive the required number of votes. The Centre parties were aware that the continuing crisis was undermining their position and, consequently, made them all the more willing to support the next candidate for the post of Premier, M. René Pleven, who was invested on August 8th without the support of the RPF and in face of the opposition of the Communists. He had adopted a moderate approach to the school problem, an approach that was almost neutral in appearance. The Socialists, however, refused to participate in the Cabinet, although they had helped to create it. They proposed, once the Cabinet was accepted by Parliament that the parliamentary session be interrupted until October. But the majority in favour of aiding the private schools refused to accept this and decided that the Assembly would take up its work again on August 21 for a short session to be devoted to the school problem.

"Une attitude intransigente risque de tout remettre en question; qu'on le veuille ou non, l'aide financière aux écoles libres est à l'heure actuelle la seule idée commune aux partis de la moitié droite de l'Assemblée nationale, du MRP au RPF. Cela veut dire que la religion apparaît comme le seul ciment possible des forces conservatrices. Plus exactement : le RPF et la droite classique utilisent les sentiments des catholiques français pour faire pression sur le MRP afin de dissocier la majorité du centre, ce qui revient à tenter de ramener au bercail conservateur les chrétiens qui s'en étaient échappés et d'annihiler tous les progrès réalisés depuis cinq années. Si les élections cantonales d'Octobre se font sur le thème de la "laïcité"

la SFIO sera rejetée vers les communistes, et tout espoir de concentration disparaîtra; la droite aura gagné son grand combat contre les républicains populaires et leur collaboration avec les socialistes; mais les catholiques, qui lui auront seulement servi d'otages, auront gagné d'être de nouveau rejetés dans le conservatisme. L'inverse perte sur le plan moral de ce retour à 1900 ne sera compensée par aucune subvention financière." 4. As far as the MRP was concerned this completed the circle of its dilemma; it found itself in the awkward position whereby as the 'Catholic' party it had to support subsidies for private schools, as a 'socialist-type' party it was split (it was a measure that would improve welfare but that would also take some authority away from the state), and as the member of the Centre majority that acted as the pivot, (balancing the Socialists on the one hand, and the more conservative parties on the other, with the RPF as a disruptive, polarizing factor waiting in the wings) it had the difficult job of trying to avoid splitting the majority at the same time as passing such legislation as would tide over the demanding pressure groups and the other parties until the Paul-Boncour committee delivered its report.

Traditionally the division between Catholics and anti-clericals had a parallel in the division between Right and Left, and there was a tradition among the former of opposition to freemasonry and even to the Republic itself. The Catholic contribution to the Resistance went far to remove these memories, something the MRP fervently hoped for. Nonetheless, although the conflict was much less intense than in earlier years it was still an important factor in the politics of the Fourth Republic. The main issue, in so far as the problem of the private schools was concerned, was not whether parents had the right to send their children to private schools, but whether private schools should

target for 'indivite'.

4. Le Monde, sélection hebdomadaire, du vendredi 20 au jeudi

26 juillet, 1951.

be subsidized from public funds. No Catholic party could fall behind its rivals on this subject without risking the loss of its clerical support and the defection of its voters. Pressure groups arose with the intent of passing legislation favourable to the private schools. Throughout the west, where a large proportion of the Catholic school population was concentrated, the supporters of the cause organized an 'Association de parents d'élèves et de l'enseignement libre', which successfully sought binding promises from candidates and, rather less successfully, to determine the local electoral alliances. Within Parliament the 'Association parlementaire pour la liberté de l'enseignement' organized its 296 pledged supporters to vote only for those governments which accepted their programme. Yet not everywhere was this considered a vital issue; in all, over two hundred deputies ignored the problem in their election addresses. But in those areas of the west and of the Massif Central where the Catholics were strong and conservative in their outlook it was an issue of vital importance and which took precedence over any worry of it splitting the Third Force majority by causing the Socialists to withdraw.

As the clergy withdrew from militant opposition to the régime and as political power shifted from the countryside to the towns, fewer village school teachers regarded themselves as embattled missionaries of the Republic. Every year diminished the large fund of accumulated mistrust which still remained for political exploitation, and with its decline the two great corporations lost their central place in political organization and conflict. However, although the teachers, perhaps the only really successful trade union in France, might have lost their old intolerant atheism they had not lost their favour for 'laïcité'. In the countryside the electoral organization of the Socialists and to some extent of the Radicals relied heavily on

the services of the teachers and of the parents' associations of the state school system. The anti-clerical parties and organizations were grouped in a 'Comité national de défense laïque' which stood alongside intellectual societies such as the 'Ligue des droits de l' homme'. Whatever a politician's political stance he tended to depend for support on a restricted social and ideological clientele, and if he tried to extend it he found that the floating vote was not a single group in the centre but a series of grouplets in the interstices between the main parties. Nowhere was there a central pool of doubtful voters open to every party; only small areas that would be open to the appeals of one or two rivals. Every party claimed to be the best defender of some group interest or sectional ideology. For instance, the Conservative in the west had to prove himself a better defender of property than the RPF, and of church schools than the MRP; and yet where social issues predominated over religion the MRP might compete with the Socialists rather than the Conservatives. The MRP, to its own regret, tended to appear after the 1951 general election, more distinctly than it did in 1945 and 1946, to be a religious party as, even though it was still undoubtedly able to win votes from non-Catholics, the MRP was still a party which was really strong only in certain limited regions of the country, most of which were strong Catholic areas.

"A disciplined party can withstand pressure better than an individual politician, but it is more vulnerable and more easily tempted in a multi-party system than in a two-party régime where one rival holds power and responsibility and the other hopes to. A majority party (actual or potential) dare not identify itself exclusively with one interest for fear of losing the floating vote. But in France perpetual coalitions obscured the responsibility. No party, hopeful of a clear majority, would give or withhold power;

for the vote did not exist. Instead multiple cleavages split the nation into several opposing camps; bourgeois against worker, peasant against townsman, Catholic against anti-clerical. Between these camps votes shifted rarely, within them frequently, for competition was fiercest between rival parties bidding for the same clientele and every moderate had to fear a more extreme defender of the same cause. At elections, parties in a permanent minority dared not offend the group on which they depended - not for victory, but for survival. In a Parliament with no majority, manoeuvre and obstruction could often be practised without success." 5 Negotiation was therefore more open, exchange of concessions more obvious, and responsibility for making, maintaining and breaking a cabinet easier to locate. While the wanton breach of an alliance incurred more discredit, support was given or withheld in large blocks and so adjustments were sudden and not always smooth. Just because responsibilities were more visible, every cabinet crisis gave rise to elaborate manoeuvres to confuse the issue and to shift the blame. Such actions might have profited an individual party, but they almost always harmed the régime. The centralized Republic was weak at the top, and loose parties, unmanageable Parliaments and unstable Governments gave every opportunity for influence, although the state's 'technocrats' often stepped into the places of the politicians and kept the concessions within reason. The weakness of the governing bodies was deplored by public figures of all views as well as by the public in general who could see on occasion that there was acute sensitivity to forces from various quarters.

The MRP inherited from its religious forebears a spiritualism that would have put it on the Right in the classic division of political tendencies. At the same time many of its Christian Democratic

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5 P. M. Williams, *Crisis and Compromise*, p. 352.

ideas tied it to the Left. There was a considerable and constant tension between the two orientations, and the MRP found itself rather ill at ease in either camp. They were one of the pillars of the régime, the defenders of the family but they did not constitute a cement since no majority could be constituted with them or without them. This political ambiguity and the unstable political position of the MRP would appear to have had basically religious causes. However, many of the specific activities of the MRP were frankly pragmatic and could in no way be attributed to Catholic inspiration of the traditional type, even though on occasion the MRP may have used its spiritualist based doctrine to justify certain actions. Most people who became MRP members or who voted MRP did so because of religious factors particularly. If there had been no 'French Catholicism' there would not have been a MRP; this was especially true since the late 1940's when the right-wing elements who had entered the MRP as the 'least-bad' party at the end of the war found their natural homes within the Independent and Gaullist parties. One thing that was obvious was the lack of homogeneity among the many Catholic groups. Each such group embodied many individual desires; religious, moral, social and even political. These groups did not aggregate political desires efficiently because they did not consider that their prime objective. The MRP never disguised the fact that it was a Christian Democratic party and it was for this reason that when an issue such as the private schools controversy arose wherein the question of religion was raised the movement had to tread very carefully so as not to prejudice its already narrower spectrum of supporters. The Church, through men such as the Bishop of Toulouse, backed the MRP strongly in the early post-war elections, but became much more reserved after 1951, partly because the hierarchy preferred more conservative parties, and partly because the movement itself wished to attract non-Catholics and

gladly promoted the few who joined it. But the electorate continued to regard the party as essentially Catholic. Thus despite its original preference for the Left, the MRP found its support coming from the traditionally conservative strongholds of the Church. However the MRP was not to follow in the footsteps of its predecessor the PDP, as, by increasing its votes outside its traditional strongholds, it foreshadowed the resilience it was to show, to its own surprise, in 1958. This can be explained to a certain extent by the nature of the movement's supporters. At the Liberation the MRP was a youthful party. Its early congresses were dominated by men in their thirties; in 1946 it had the second highest proportion of young deputies (after the Communists) and in 1951 the highest of all. In spite of the gradual disillusionment of many left-wing militants, who subsequently left the movement, and in spite of the fact that little new blood was brought in, it was a generation that was represented by the MRP, a generation that had come to recognize the importance of principles, while not negating or denying the position of institutions. Disillusioned militants in the MRP were more likely to leave the party than to remain rebelliously within it. The rank and file's solidarity and devotion to a common cause enabled ministers easily to defeat their critics, but also preserved the movement from the violent internal clashes so common among its rivals. MRP deputies (and especially potential ministers) were always more impressed than the militants with the advantages of participation in government. Their hold on the party was secured not only by its organizational structure but also by the increasing weight of its conservative-minded electorate in the west and north-east; in consequence, the left wing suffered repeated frustrations. During the 1951 general election more than a quarter of the MRP deputies had allied themselves with the Right or even the RPF and placed themselves in opposition to the Socialists; more widespread alliances with the RPF were prevented only by de Gaulle's and the RPF's intransigence.



"... The Gaullists in the Assembly by no means represented simply the defense of privilege of the propertied classes; Gaullism in 1951 drew many active supporters from the Radicals, the MRP, and various groups in the UDSR, as well as from political amateurs. It was the right wing of the RPF, not the left, that broke Gaullist discipline to support Pinay; and when the remaining deputies were able to vote freely after the General's withdrawal from politics in 1953, they situated themselves in the center of the "social" spectrum, much as the UNR did later.

"The essential grievance of many of the Assembly's leaders against de Gaulle in 1947-53 was precisely that he would be freer from their control than they wished. It was the "republican" defense - reflex against authority that united the anti-Gaullist forces and allowed the RPF to be defined as "extreme right". It would have been truer to call the RPF an antiparliamentarian party of the "social center"; many French observers recognized this. Yet because de Gaulle wished more power than the parties would grant him - albeit within a constitutional framework - they engaged in a skillful defensive operation that showed the "system" at its best. In constructive forward-looking policy, the "system" was less successful; but in "republican defense" it changed the electoral system, stabilized the cabinet, shortened ministerial crises, and postponed elections until the Gaullist tide receded." 6 Nonetheless, contrary to certain predictions, the RPF did not really try to outdo the proposals of the 'Association parlementaire pour la liberte de l'enseignement' in favour of aiding private schools. During the debates, the Gaullist spokesmen tried to demonstrate that the educational grants did not contradict the fundamental principle of the separation of church and state, to which

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6 D. Macrae, *Parliament, Parties and Society*, p.313.

they declared their loyal attachment. It was obvious that they did not want to antagonize the left-wing followers of the RPF or to allow themselves to be identified during the debate with the old Right and the pro-clericals. Here lay the crucial difference between the MRP and the RPF. No longer could the MRP stand back and act as an arbiter or judge and balance between the Left and the Right. Even the Radicals could accept the Loi Barange because, in spite of their strong secular element, they were conservative and therefore the conflict was less than it might otherwise have been. The other parties with links on the Right could all be cagey, and here the RPF was the leader with its attitude of basic belief in the separation of Church and State, but a stated preference to be practical. This attitude tended to avoid the party stepping on anyone's toes. The MRP, however, simply because it was the 'Catholic' party and because of the nature of its electorate found itself forced to support the bill, and this position was very uncomfortable for a number of MRP deputies and adherents. General de Gaulle had shaken the parties in 1947, "but the politicians rightly estimated that his impact would not be permanent. He won over a few devoted followers, mostly from MRP, many time-servers who jumped off his bandwagon as soon as it slowed down, and a handful of natural rebels or adventurers seeking a leader against the System - but often no happier with Gaullist discipline than with any other. RPF could insist on strict obedience (though at the cost of defections) so long as it was a large party with hopes of reconstructing the régime. But in 1952 Antoine Pinay captured the sympathies of conservatives both in Parliament and the country and when de Gaulle's mass support evaporated the RPF parliamentarians were rapidly absorbed by the System." 7

As the party of the French Revolution the Radicals stood for values and fears deeply ingrained in the French political psychology; the defence of the weak against the powerful, the cult of the little man, the mistrust of aristocracies of birth and wealth, the demand for equality. But the Socialists were competitors in the same field, and the rise of Communism gave more weight to the conflicts which placed the Radicals on the Right than to those which had located them on the Left. To Thibaudet laïcité had been at the very centre of the Radical outlook; but it began to seem out-of-date when even rural Radicals feared the Communists more than the Church. To preserve the traditional electoral alliance with the Socialists most provincial deputies opposed the Barange bill to subsidize the church schools; but they did so rather half-heartedly, avoiding the subject when they could, voting as constituency interests dictated when they had to, and leaving fervent anti-clericalism to their allies. The Socialists vigorously expressed their hostility to the measure and declared that the majority would be destroyed. The MRP on the contrary considered that the whole affair was just an episode and that once the problem was settled there would be nothing to stand in the way of its reaffirming its solidarity with the Socialists on economic matters, and, particularly in the immediate future on the question of the Socialist sponsored sliding wage-scale bill. The struggle was thus waged between parties and provinces, classes and ideologies, as well as between organizations. But as the prudence of the politicians of the System indicated it was far less intense in the Fourth Republic than in the Third and the issue was to cool gradually as the benefits came to be seen in a more equanimous light; for instance, it enabled all children to receive an education as there were enough institutions and teachers operating to fill the need if they were properly employed, and it also meant that communal finances were boosted by the subsidy that also applied to state schools.

Bills on the schools question quickly came to the fore in the new Legislature, even though economic and international questions were also pressing. Both the RPF and the parliamentary association for the private schools favoured this development; the former because they wished to encourage a split of the cabinet coalition, and the latter because there was a clear "pro-clerical" majority in the new Legislature. The parliamentary session started again on August 21; it had been hoped that it would last only about ten days, but actually it lasted much longer, as it was not adjourned until September 25. It was devoted almost exclusively to the discussion of two bills concerning private education. On August 17 at its first full meeting, M. Pleven's Cabinet approved a Bill prepared by the Minister of Education (M. André Marie) which, in order to meet in part the demand for State aid to Roman Catholic and other private schools, allocated an additional 850,000,000 francs for State scholarships (bourses nationales), the holders of which would be allowed to attend either State or private secondary schools. The Bill also provided for the relaxation of controls hindering the building of new schools, the expenditure of 12,000,000,000 francs on the building of new State schools, and the appointment of 700 new teachers and assistant teachers. The debate on the Bill in the National Assembly, after being twice postponed as the result of Socialist and Communist delaying tactics, opened on August 30. This Bill was passed on September 4 by 361 votes to 236, the RPF joined the MRP, Independents, and other government parties who voted in favour of the Bill, whilst the Socialists and Communists were joined in opposition, the Radicals being split. The Bill was promulgated on September 21, but not before the Council of the Republic had tacked on an amendment stipulating that all schools qualifying for State scholarships must conform to certain educational standards laid down by the Government.

The National Assembly, however, restored the original text when it was reread.

Meanwhile September 4 also saw the beginning of the debate on M. Charles Barange's Bill on behalf of the Parliamentary Association for Freedom of Education (an organization consisting of some 300 MRP, RPF and other deputies of the Right and Centre). The text of the Bill, after referring in its preamble to the great difficulties imposed on public education by the shortage of premises and the poor quality of equipment, and on private education by the lack of funds to ensure adequate payment for teachers, provided: that parents should receive a State allowance of 1000 francs a term for each child attending a primary school; that in the case of children attending a state school this sum should be paid directly into a fund controlled by the local authorities for the upkeep, alteration, and equipment of school buildings, that in the case of children attending a private school the money should be paid to the parents' association responsible for the running of the school, that allowances for the winter term should be paid before October 15, that in certain cases local authorities should be empowered to make grants to private schools, that the allowances should be financed out of an increase in the Production Tax, which would be paid into a Special Treasury Account, and that these arrangements should cease to have effect on the coming into force of the general educational reform legislation that was currently being considered by the Paul-Boncour Commission. The authors of the Bill hoped that the opposition of the anti-clericals would be somewhat diminished because four-fifths of the funds expended would go to the public schools. But the bill took on a symbolic significance for both sides and, in addition, the opponents of the bill continually acted as though the bill would aid the private schools exclusively. "On passe ensuite aux explications de vote sur l'ensemble. M. Charles Lussy (socialiste) déclare:

"Les socialistes ne sont pas près d'oublier." S'adressant au MRP, il ajoute: "Vous n'avez pas reculé devant le risque d'une crise de régime. Conservez cette responsabilité... Vous nous avez donné un exemple de ce que peuvent la patience et la tenacité. Nous ne l'oublirons pas."

M. Soustelle (RPF) constate: "Nos idées ont fait leur chemin... quant à la laïcité de l'Etat, elle n'a jamais été au fond du débat."

M. de Menthon (MRP) déclare: "Les socialistes doivent se plier à la loi de la majorité." Citant, M. Binot (socialiste), il termine:

"La loi va être votée, le gouvernement l'appliquera, la République continue."

L'ensemble de la proposition de loi est adopté par 313 voix contre 255.<sup>8</sup> The Bill was passed on September 10, those supporting it comprising 115 RPF (out of 120), 76 MRP (out of 87), 44 Independents (out of 54), 36 Action Paysanne (out of 41), 12 Radicals (out of 75), 9 UDSR (out of 15), 8 Independents d'outre-mer (out of 9) the 3 Français indépendents, the 2 RDA, and 8 non-inscrits. The opposition consisted of the 106 Socialists, the 97 Communists, and the 4 Progressistes, 46 of the 75 Radicals and 2 UDSR. In addition to all the members of the Government, 9 Radicals abstained from the vote. On September 21 the Bill was passed in the Council of the Republic by 123 votes to 119, with several amendments. Some of these were agreed to by the National Assembly when the Bill came up for its second reading later the same day, but the Assembly restored the original provision on the financing of the allocations by an increase in the Production Tax, and finally passed the Bill by 327 votes to 221. The legislation, which did not apply to Algeria, was promulgated on September 28.

M. Lussy accused the MRP of being prepared to sacrifice the majority for the sake of one of its principles and proceeded to make

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<sup>8</sup> L'Année Politique, 1951, p.221.

it plain that he felt it to be playing with fire, particularly as the RPF had notified the MRP that they could not count on it to vote for the budget they, in conjunction with others of the majority, were preparing. M. Soustelle (RPF) observed that the division on the Bill bore no relationship to the system of party alliances which had existed at the general election and derided the Government for having renounced "even the principle of Ministerial solidarity", as shown by the fact that its members had voted in three different ways in the divisions during the course of the debate and had decided to abstain on the final vote; and asserted that it thus demonstrated that its majority could not hold together, and in these circumstances could not maintain power much longer.

"M. de Léotard (RFR) déclare, le 11 septembre; "Les deux projets de loi qui viennent d'être adoptés par des majorités solides et presque identiques, marquent la volonté certaine de cette Assemblée de ne pas dissocier la justice scolaire de la justice sociale." En sens inverse, le Comité de Défense Laïque constate "qu'il n'est pas trouvé une majorité pour renier ouvertement le principe de la laïcité par la Constitution.... La République est irrémédiablement divisée!"

Le débat scolaire a fait apparaître une nouvelle majorité de droite. Celle-ci remplacera-t-elle "la majorité"? comme le souhaitent RPF et quelques modérés, ou, au contraire, restera-t-elle une majorité de rencontre? Ce n'est pas l'une des moindres conséquences du vote des lois scolaires. Il est à remarquer cependant que l'habileté de M. Fleven a réussi à maintenir le gouvernement malgré la violence des débats." 9

CHAPTER IV

THE MRP AND POLITICAL REALITY

The political system of the Fourth Republic, whereby authority was decided and delegated day by day, enabled the government of the day to speak in the name of a majority of which it was the living and changing reflection. "L' 'inconvenient c' est que, d' un cabinet à l' autre, il y a de longues périodes de vacances de pouvoir, pendant lesquelles les ministres ne font plus qu' expédier les affaires courantes. S'il n'y avait pas le Président de la République, la notion même de l' exécutif s' évanouirait....Ce qu'il faudrait, ce serait une revision de la conception même de l' exécutif, contrôlé sans doute mais existant par lui-même et non pas seulement comme un reflet. La IIIe République avait hérité du passé cette conception du gouvernement: la IVe l' a perdue. Nous avons abouti à un régime où l' autorité se négocie, non pas pour un bail ménageant sa dignité, mais au jour le jour, chaque fois, pour chaque affaire, pour chaque mouvement." <sup>1</sup> Such a situation was obviously easily capable of deteriorating rapidly to such an extent that parliamentary government itself could become endangered. This, in effect, was the vital issue of the day. Yet even in the face of such a potential threat the parties of the centre showed themselves to be not only unable, but, often, unwilling to bind together as a stable coalition. Their differences were frequently spotlighted on stages consisting of the most minor issues as well as on ones of the broadest financial and economic import.

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<sup>1</sup> L' Année Politique, P. XI.



The Korean war and its side-effects immediately ended the respite from chronic inflation (between mid-1950 and the end of 1951 retail prices in Paris rose by 328%). The most insistent union demand was for a sliding-scale of wages that would go beyond the tacit form of a sliding-scale that existed in the form of the adjustable government-fixed minimum wage that had been first set in August 1950 and twice raised in 1951. The Government itself, however, was confronted with financial difficulties, and looked with longing towards the untapped sources of tax revenue in the business, farming and professional communities. But none of the coalition governments had either the internal cohesion or the courage to try raising taxes except by increasing the taxes which were easiest to levy and to collect, of which the indirect taxes were an increasing part. Rearmament, in addition to being a bone of contention between the parties of left and right, imposed a serious financial burden on the country and also required the services of many young men. The weight of this burden was distributed inequitously, and French labour saw this; it was this unfair apportionment of the load that the Socialists wanted to prevent; they saw that, although the condition of all the people was improving in real terms, those who had more to start with were benefiting more than proportionately in comparison to those who had less. The most broadly accepted claims of labour - a modest, steady increase in purchasing power, an expanded housing programme, and a less sordid allowance for the aged - would have to wait, and this did not please workers. French public opinion, because of the addition of new divisive forces to its many political tendencies, was at this time possibly more confusedly split and more unstable than it had ever been. The consequences of this fragmentation of opinion were aggravated by the substitution in almost every case of tightly organized parties for the flexible and undisciplined groups of earlier days. The investment programme for the modernization of the French economy required from

every social group sacrifices which were made more acute by the fact that they were demanded at a time when French resources had been considerably depleted by the physical destruction of two wars, by the liquidation of most of France's old foreign investments, and by the flight of capital due to the depreciation of the currency. Finally, the international tension forced France to make decisive choices and additional sacrifices which further aggravated its economic position and made it more difficult to maintain a satisfactory balance of social forces. Such a situation required democratic institutions capable of creating a government that would be coherent, stable and strong. The French political tradition, however, was not conducive to satisfying these requirements. Since democracy emerged in France, the governments had been almost always divided, unstable, and weak. The reasons for this were varied. Firstly there was the Constitution itself. This had been drawn up by men with too little experience and this led to certain mistakes. For instance, the relationship between the National Assembly and the Cabinet was badly out of balance and the Government was at the mercy of the Assembly. "Not only was there a general desire to keep the executive under control, a desire that worked against some of the quite sensible laws and rules of the parliamentary system; there was also a general desire to keep colleagues who had won the prize of a ministry from growing too big for their boots. And there was a desire not to see too much power in the hands of any group - for so many interests not represented by that group might be in danger." 2 Secondly, the electoral systems tended to cause disruption and disharmony. The systems of 1945 and 1951 both gave excessive authority to the executive committees of the parties; and also the systems allowed party militants to work too effectively. Nor did the systems force the

2 N. Leites, On the Game of Politics in France, pp. X - XI.

parties to tone down those things that divided them, when they allied. Nor did they prevent purely negative alliances. The third problem was the chief defect of French parliamentary procedure, which was the excessive importance conferred on committees, as this resulted in a serious dilution of responsibilities which enabled interest groups to intervene effectively, but discreetly, in the preparation of legislation. The final obstruction was the problem of reforming industry. This was part of the general problem of restoring effective democracy in France through institutional changes as the latter would not suffice by themselves, however necessary they were, if the public were not persuaded that democracy was more than a facade.

There also existed a set of political habits, from which rules could be deduced, which were often detrimental to the functioning of a system which was already hampered by its very nature. For instance, in the French system under the Fourth Republic, it was very rare for the blame for something going wrong to be imputed to anybody or even to any group. In the light of this it was hardly surprising that there was a certain lack of faith, on the part of the public, in deputies. French politics were not in practice as bedeviled by ideology as many French intellectuals chose to believe. French parliamentary politics were, however, much bedeviled by interest groups, and it was these pressure groups, as much as unbridled personal ambition, that worked to produce instability. Often great issues were not debated, and, above all, not decided, while issues important to the Assembly or to its members were debated. The esprit de corps of the Assembly worked against the stability of governments, as offices were continually shuffled around, as though there were resentment that anybody should stay in office too long; and within the limits of built-in irresponsibility, the politicians could, of course, display animosity, ambition, and rancour. Within the Assembly cattiness reigned supreme. The

results of these political habits were serious and bad. Again and again, important decisions were postponed until good solutions were impossible. An equally important result of these habits was the great difficulty of planning and executing long-range designs. Yet, the Fourth Republic had much to its credit, notably an astounding economic recovery and advance. Many long-term projects were put in hand; many were successfully completed. Perhaps the politicians deserved some credit, but they could not get it; the evasion of responsibility worked both ways. The men who played this game were often worthy of playing a different game. They did not get the chance, and nor were they able to make that chance possible.

The fall of France and the Vichy interlude gave elements among French Catholics a new impetus to find a bridge between their faith and the needs of contemporary society - particularly that urban industrial society, for the most part long estranged from the Church. This impetus took varied forms ranging from the idea of Communists and Catholics working in a movement to better working-class conditions to the idea of creating a new major party devoted to the Church, but definitely on the Left in its social and economic programme.

"In some ways it was an advantage for the MRP to be classified as the 'Catholic party'; there was a certain tenacity, devotion to doctrine and party loyalty within the MRP that may have been related to the religiosity of its members. An anti-clerical Radical Socialist from Burgundy commented that many opponents of the MRP were afraid the party would keep its promises. But there is a general political disadvantage for the MRP in being identified as the Catholic party. France is Catholic on the surface, but there are relatively few practising Catholics in France. Anti-clericalism is a strong political force, especially in the Radical Socialist and Socialist parties (as well as the Communist Party, of course). The MRP had

sought uniqueness by calling itself the party of the Fourth Republic, but it was given an unsolicited and unwanted unique position when many identified it as the Catholic party." <sup>3</sup> Both the MRP and the trades union organization, the CFTC, were Catholic, but neither was controlled by the Hierarchy. Two factors differentiated Catholic inspiration organizations from groups closer to the Hierarchy. Firstly, they were distinct from the Church and from officially mandated Catholic structures; there were no visible ties with the ecclesiastical nucleus as such, and non-Catholics were welcome in all these organizations. Secondly, they were not restricted in the political role they could play. In practice two main principles linked these groups with the church; in the first instance, the majority of individual members were in fact Catholics, resolved to apply the social doctrine of the Church wherever they could, even though the organizations in which they found themselves were "neutral"; and in the second instance, most members of the MRP and the CFTC had a strong desire to stay "in the family" even when this could not be consecrated by an ecclesiastical mandate. Doctrinally, their conception of society did not favour the creation of an effective state structure. The MRP, following the line of thought of certain Catholic philosophers, felt that the various natural groups of which human society consists - families, towns, trades or professions, churches, and so on - all possessed, by natural law, a private area of activity in which the state should not intervene. Their fear of the encroachments of a Jacobin, omnipotent state prevented them from understanding the necessity for a strong state. They hoped to overcome the individualism of the Third Republic by "organizing" democracy through the new role conferred on political parties and by complicated legal

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<sup>3</sup> R. B. Capelle, *The MRP and French Foreign Policy*, p.15.

mechanisms - such as the investiture of the Premier prior to the formation of the cabinet, the requirement of a delay before taking the vote on notions of censure or confidence, and the requirement of special majorities for certain decisions. In practice these mechanisms were to be unworkable or harmful. In the light of these factors, therefore, it was hardly surprising that when conditions became unfavourable in any way the MRP lost the leadership of a Centre that was generally weakening.

Given the fragmented nature of French politics wherein governments and majorities were continually changing it was extremely difficult for long term plans to be either formulated or executed. Often deputies were not interested in the general good of Metropolitan France, preferring to foster their own personal and regional interests. Somewhat surprisingly there was no decline in the level of political participation on the part of Frenchmen. There was certainly no indication that compulsory voting was necessary in order to keep up a declining political interest. Perhaps in fact this interest was heightened by the political situation. "Between the rival advocates (the RPF and the CP) of strong and dynamic government, the moderate groups waged a dogged and persistent struggle for survival. But they survived the difficult years, and when in 1949 relative economic stability was achieved public support began gradually to swing back from the extreme to the centre parties." 4

Most of the ministerial crises up to the 1951 elections were provoked by the intransigence of the Socialists, "who wanted to stop the trend toward liberalism in French economic policy and to defend

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To some degree the MRP was found itself in a similar situation.

4. P. M. Williams, *French Politicians and Elections*, p. 19.

5. P. Cognat, *France Under the Fourth Republic*, p. 100.

the interests of the wage earners by procuring for them, in the absence of lower prices, substantial increases in wages. But the Socialist party was never able to achieve its aims. On the contrary, each crisis was followed by a reinforcement of the influence of the liberals on the majority and on the government. The marginal position of the Radicals and the Moderates, who were indispensable for the formation of a majority in the National Assembly, gave them an irresistible bargaining position, especially as part of the MRP was aware of the liberal preferences of its electors. The failure of the initial conception of the Third Force was reflected in the economic and social sphere by the exact opposite of what its promoters would have wanted. Not only could no new economic or social reforms be carried out after November 1947, but the working masses were not able to improve their standard of living in proportion to the considerable increase in production. There was significant economic recovery, aided by the Marshall Plan, and the increased quantities of consumer's goods enabled all the French, even those belonging to the humblest classes, to improve their material situation with respect to the poverty of the first postwar years. But this improvement was proportionally much greater for the wealthy and the privileged than for the great mass of the people. That is what the Socialists had wanted to prevent, but the political situation made them the prisoners of the Radicals and of the Moderates because they wanted neither to leave the way open for the Gaullists nor to come to terms with the Communists, and were thus left with no effective way of making their views prevail." 5

To some degree the MRP now found itself in a similar situation for fundamental reforms. The MRP government...

The traditional parties had been slow and reluctant to accept the MRP as a political ally or even to admit its right to exist at all. The MRP militants who despised and rebelled against the traditional Conservatives were forced into unwilling association with them by the reticence of more desirable partners. This problem was shown at its clearest in the disgruntlement felt by many for the Radical's leader, Pierre Mendès-France, in 1954-55 when he tried to play the progressive, regenerating role in which they had once cast themselves; to reproduce their former attacks against a "system" to which they now belonged; to appeal to the very groups - youth, women, progressive Catholics - which they had once hoped to make their own; and because he attracted a popular enthusiasm and confidence which their own leaders had failed to arouse. In effect the MRP had lost the central, controlling position it once occupied as the guiding-light of the Third Force and it was now reduced to more of an element, rather than the catalyst it once was. This occurred because political opinions became more alienated from the centre groups and the MRP lost many of its votes, becoming thereby less of a movement and more of a party. In effect, had not the RPF already passed its zenith it is highly probable some form of coalition could have arisen at this time containing a Gaullist majority.

The rightward trend in politics had been highly probable, in part as reaction to the Communist departure from the government, after the Centre parties had proved themselves capable of surviving but of little more. "The new Assembly [of 1954] showed little disposition to tackle the problems of economic programming or France's international position. In vain did chronic budgetary deficits focus the need for fundamental reforms. The Pleven government fell because the Assembly would not give it the authority to lessen expenditure [a thing abhorrent to the Socialists], the Faure government fell because the



Assembly would not let it raise more money in taxes. With the Socialists settled in the opposition, the only change possible was to move somewhat further to the right in making up a cabinet." 6

In December 1951 the Pleven ministry won its solitary triumph when the Assembly ratified by a large and unexpected majority the Schuman Plan for a European coal and steel community. But its own supporters were no longer reliable. The MRP joined the three opposition parties in passing the sliding-scale bill. The Radicals and the Conservatives attacked Robert Schuman for attempting to conciliate the Tunisian nationalists. René Mayer, the minister of finance, was a target for the Peasant group of right-wing Conservatives. Finally the budget, which called for special powers to reorganize the social services and nationalized railways, drove the Socialists into opposition and they defeated the cabinet in January 1952. The new premier was Edgar Faure, a young Radical leader, who tried to win them back by concessions over Europe and Tunisia, the budget and the sliding-scale bill; the Conservatives and many of his own party revolted, and on proposing higher taxes he was beaten on a vote of confidence at the end of February. A Conservative, Antoine Pinay, was nominated. His expected failure was meant to show these rebels that there was no right-wing alternative to the old majority and that they must therefore make the necessary concessions. But to the general astonishment he achieved the impossible. 27 Gaullist deputies defied their whip to vote him into the premiership at the head of the most conservative majority France had known for twenty years. Aided by a world-wide fall in prices Pinay succeeded in checking inflation (and expansion), restoring confidence and winning a great popular reputation.

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6 V. R. Lorwin, *The French Labor Movement*, p. 138.

Inevitably this provoked parliamentary jealousy. But not until the end of 1952 did the Radicals and the MRP feel it safe to overthrow him; the former with their usual skill manoeuvring the latter into taking the blame. Thus it was that the swing to the right occurred. To a certain degree it was a natural outcome of a basically conservative country that had a tendency to vote simply for the party list which, in the individual's mind, stood for the particular principles to which he was attracted: for freedom of business interests, for anti-clericalism, for socialistic Catholicism, for Republicanism, for the defence of the interests of the workers, as the case might be.

That a swing to the right might arise out of what was basically a left of centre governing group was more possible than a swing to the left is not surprising as the groups to the left were traditionally highly organized and the degree of the strength and the opinions of their members and supporters were well known; whereas to the right party structures were much less developed and programmes less clearly defined - after all one of the major threats the right used against the left was that of the disbandment of political parties, something that would effectively cripple the left but not the more fluid right. In the midst of this struggle were the parties of the centre, and, once the initiative slipped from their hands and when their cohesion weakened as a result of the Church-schools question, it was they who suffered the most as, even though at future elections they might receive approximately the same proportion of the votes cast that they received during the 1951 election, they were no longer regarded as the hope for not only political stability but also for social and economic success that they once had been. The MRP was unable to solve the problem of whether it should be a voice or an echo. This dilemma was particularly poignant in the case of the MRP as its choice and its range of options was severely restricted and it found itself obliged to step down from its position as leader and assume a more obscure and less creative role.

The Fourth Republic had, as well as its weaknesses, strengths. There were elements of stability behind the political instability which should not be ignored. For the first ten years after the Liberation, up to the summer of 1954, the Quai d'Orsay was practically monopolized by two ministers, Georges Bidault and Robert Schuman, both belonging to the same party, the MRP. The re-shaping of the French economy was largely free from the vagaries of party politics. It was entrusted to a commission inspired and headed by the brilliant technocrat, Jean Monnet. If the political and financial weaknesses of the Fourth Republic are often stressed, it is only fair also to give credit to its positive achievements. These were particularly in the fields of foreign and economic policy.

The political stage was not so heartening, however, and it was littered with a large number of properties, some more important than others. Nonetheless, each camp was afraid of exploiting temporary advantages, as it might thereby needlessly provoke a later disastrous counter-offensive. Thus the slight parliamentary majority in favour of Catholic schools which resulted from the election of 1951 did not go beyond granting a quite limited subsidy to these schools in the so-called Loi Barange of that year. The equally slight majority hostile to Catholic schools which resulted from the elections of 1956 also refrained from abrogating that law. In the campaigns preceding both these general elections, the problem of state subsidies to Catholic schools - the only major outstanding problem in the relations between Church and State - played but a minor role, thanks to mutual restraint. In order to survive, governments tended to proclaim their neutrality when this question came up before parliament. The almost traditional situation of one crisis - one solution - one government was not as yet broken and the reason for this lay in the political system and in the political parties. Such a diversity of

opinion was permitted, and even apparently did not require allied parties to adopt a common platform. Thus government by compromise, or even by deliberately avoiding issues so that a cabinet would not be split, became the rule of the day. Once again France had been unable to find the system and the stable and strong government that she needed during the difficult years that then prevailed. The nation almost seemed to prefer a state of semi-anarchy to an ordered and, possibly, more restrictive system. In a sense measures such as the 1951 electoral law were a vaccine against such a situation ever arising. But it was not a real solution in the long run.

"The MRP has professed to be a political movement serving all groups in the French nation, and has maintained that, in contrast with other French political parties, it is not a "class" party. But its geographical centres of strength are so limited that it would be difficult for the MRP to maintain any proper contact with all groups in France. As for freedom from class allegiance, the party appears on the contrary to be primarily confined to a social milieu that might best be described as that portion of French lower middle-class composed of practising Catholics. This milieu is to be found primarily in the rural areas.... The MRP is not conservative enough in political and economic matters to satisfy most of the upper class or the grande bourgeoisie (...) in the cities, most of whom are closely connected with business. On the other hand, the MRP is too conservative to draw the bulk of its support from the lower class. Nevertheless, François Goguel credited the party with having as much support from labor in 1954 as the Socialists had or as the RPF of de Gaulle had at the peak of its career. He also noted, however, that the MRP was moving towards conservatism and had in general replaced, in its local strongholds, the moderate or conservative parties of the Third Republic. A student of Catholic parties in Europe has declared that "Catholicism and conservatism are expressions of an identical community type",

and this seems to hold true as well for the Christian-democratic wing of Catholicism. The Christian-democratic vote has generally grown at the expense of the conservative parties." 7 Nonetheless each party represented, on average, a reasonable cross-section of the community, some, obviously, more than others, but naturally there was an element within each party that was stronger than the other elements - for instance within the MRP it was the group of people who could be reasonably described as that portion of the French lower middle-class composed of practising Catholics and inhabiting primarily rural areas that provided the mainstay of the party. The combination of a large cross-section of the community and of one group within this predominating meant that it was easy for internal division to occur within a party as a result of the conflict of interests. This enigmatic situation was compounded by the fact that most parties were surrounded by political groups that could provide reasonably attractive alternatives for a disillusioned follower. Thus it was that in the meantime an obscure political condition was not to be clarified in spite of, and perhaps because of, an apparently high interest on the part of the people in the political scene.

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7 R. B. Capelle, *The MRP and French Foreign Policy*, pp.13-14.

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