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Social Reform, State Reform, and Aristide Briand's Moment of Hope in France, 1909–1910

Julian Wright

The period of Aristide Briand's first ministry, from the summer of 1909 to the autumn of 1910, offers a very particular window on the politics and intellectual arguments of the Third Republic. Falling between a period of comparative stability, when the Radical governments of Emile Combes (1902–5) and Georges Clemenceau (1906–9) had dominated politics, and a period of greater confusion, from 1910 to 1914, Briand's first ministry coincided with a great resurgence of optimism in French politics. Combes and Clemenceau had fought battles that, according to republican orthodoxy, were necessary to establish the republic on a firmer footing. Yet these battles had been divisive. A constructive reform agenda, led by the soft-tongued center-left politician Briand, offered a new tone and a new hope. The diversity of the forces that coalesced in support of Briand gives his "moment of hope" great significance for understanding the nature of republican political debate in the Third Republic as a whole.

One important reason to focus on Briand's first government is that the complexity of the period from 1909 to the First World War is often oversimplified in textbooks, where, understandably, the space for these years is devoted largely to foreign affairs. There is more at stake here, however. During Briand's first ministry several strands of French political thought came together that have received too little attention. Questions such as how to decentralize the state and reform the electoral system fascinated republicans at the time; and yet much historiography

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sidelines those very questions. From the Boulanger crisis and the Dreyfus affair through the political crisis of the mid-1920s and the Popular Front, the history of the Third Republic is often written as one of moments of divisions between the two great movements in French politics, reaction and revolution.¹ It is this dialectic that sets the agenda, and issues that do not fit its conceptualization of French politics are often neglected. Briand's "moment of hope," then, demonstrates the complexity of French politics. The intellectual movements and political debates that are our subject here do not easily fit into the classic narrative of French political history. Thus our analysis of Briand's moment of hope has to be situated within a revisiting of the history of the Third Republic as a whole.

Three vital themes came together during Briand's first government: state reform, social reform, and, underscoring both, what we may call an "impulse" for reconciliation. These have a relevance that goes beyond the bounds of the Third Republic to the whole idea of the state and social reform in contemporary France. In the wider perspective, the most interesting legacies have been left by constructive reformers such as the social reformers of the Third Republic, the state planners of the 1950s, or the advocates of decentralization since the 1980s. A commentator of 1910 described decentralization as a theme that had been pored over for decades but that always seemed new and startling. How pertinent that remark is in the twenty-first century.² Jean-Pierre Raffarin framed his whole governmental enterprise within a mission to decentralize and rejuvenate the republic; but this present-day state reformer has roots in a belle époque that French history has only recently begun to examine.³ Thus the movement for state reform in 1910 foreshadowed a debate still unresolved today.

If state reform was one of the main themes of Briand's first ministry, social reform was its essential complement. The social reform movement dwelt on several issues, but at its heart was the attempt to improve labor relations. Judith F. Stone, who has been at the forefront of work on this movement, has shown how such ideas penetrated the Radical

¹ The classic characterization was that of the party of *movement* and the party of *order*: François Goguel, *La politique des partis sous la IIIe République*, 4th ed. (Paris, 1958).

² Henry Bérenger, in *L'action*, May 16, 1910: "Who would have thought that the idea of reorganizing France's administration on regional lines would have seemed a novelty, or a chimera? If ever a question has been studied, discussed, elucidated over the last eighty years, it is that one. Well! Ask ten Frenchmen at random: you won't find three who know the first thing about it. This will not stop them from shrugging their shoulders if someone, grounding their argument in tradition and reason, suggests that they can accomplish regional reform."

³ Much of the rationale behind Raffarin's program may be found in his book *Pour une nouvelle gouvernance* (Paris, 2002).

Party.⁴ But social reform was essential to a wider group of republicans. Because the Radicals were often obsessed with the defense of the republic, there was a debate within Radicalism about whether social reform was a distraction or a vital agenda that would rejuvenate the republic.

A third theme underpins these two reform movements, that of *apaisement* (appeasement). This term was not merely a slogan—and it was coined in domestic political debate, not in the context of inter-war internationalism.⁵ I would argue that the word contained a serious reflection on the nature of political reform. Those who embraced state reform and social reform described their politics as a “constructive” politics, or a “politique réaliste” (i.e., a “politics of the real” or “politics of the possible,” rather than a “cynically realist politics”). In 1910 this constructive politics was predicated on reconciliation. Indeed, Briand’s most important contribution may have been not so much a precise reform agenda as the expression of this feeling of reconciliation and generosity.⁶ Yet French republicanism has never been entirely happy about reconciling itself with its opponents. One commentator said that the Third Republic had failed because it could never achieve true political consensus.⁷ The idea of *apaisement* has been described, both at the time and subsequently, as a nefarious attempt to build a coalition of Socialists and reactionaries against the dominant Radical Party, which, with its concentration on the issues of universal suffrage and the lay state, is the most apt representative of republicanism. It is time to revisit this overly cynical position. Since François Furet’s seminal *Penser la Révolution française*, the question of the end of the Revolution has been reopened.⁸ With this in mind, the concept of reconciliation may be seen as an attempt to halt the cycle of revolution and install a regime of real progress and reform. Whether all republicans were ready for this in 1910 is of course another matter, but for the reformers who came together around Briand, the rejuvenation of the republic had to begin with reconciliation.

These three themes, then, state reform, social reform, and the impulse for reconciliation, define our understanding of Briand’s first ministry. To examine these topics, we will focus first on the intellectual

⁴ Judith F. Stone, *The Search for Social Peace: Reform Legislation in France, 1890–1914* (New York, 1985).

⁵ One commentator to present Briand’s campaign for *apaisement* in a positive light was Georges Bonnamour, *L’apaisement: Les services français d’un homme d’état* (Paris, 1913).

⁶ In Oct. 1910, one of Briand’s correspondents described his conception of the republic as “generous, expansive, fraternal.” Ministère des affaires étrangères, PA-AP 335 (papiers Briand), vol. 25 (hereafter “Briand papers,” followed by volume number).

⁷ Joseph Paul-Boncour, *Entre deux guerres*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1945).

⁸ François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. E. Forster (Cambridge, 1981).

discussions that preceded Briand's appointment as *président du conseil* (president of the council, or prime minister). These can be traced back to the late 1890s, through the young writers and politicians who led the debate. In 1910 Briand brought social and state reform together, giving them the umbrella heading *rajeunissement* (rejuvenation), yet not all of the young intellectuals who had prepared the way for Briand would have agreed that the two ideas could be so connected. Some concentrated on social reform and others on state reform—and, as will become clear toward the end of our discussion, this dichotomy persisted through 1910 and helps explain the ultimate failure of Briand's enterprise. One character is particularly important to the preliminary study of intellectual precursors. Henry Bérenger is interesting not only because he combined the two strands in his journalism but because he had until 1906 been a most virulent advocate of the movement for republican defense that attacked the church. No appeaser, he reveled in the battle between right and left, and yet, during Briand's first ministry he was known as the intellectual mouthpiece of the government, insisting that republicans embrace reform. His commentary on Briand's first ministry is an important source for our study of the politics of 1910, not least because it demonstrates how Radicalism itself divided on whether to support Briand.

Having presented this intellectual movement and its different strands, we will reintroduce the character of Aristide Briand. Although he encapsulated the hope of both state reformers and social reformers, he was no theorist and did not really belong to the intellectual movements that placed such hope in him. His untheoretical approach was important to reformers, however. They thought that one of the republic's problems was that it was obsessed with ideology and less concerned with concrete results. This develops the concept we have already outlined as a "politique réaliste." The "realism" of Briand and his intellectual precursors is an undercurrent in our analysis here. As much as the actual reforms he proposed, Briand's emphasis on concrete and constructive measures is what won the young intellectuals over. There is, however, an irony here that will become increasingly evident in our analysis. Briand was himself unable to grasp the political "realism" needed to make his agenda work in 1910. Ultimately, he could not overcome the "real" problem of establishing a majority in the Chamber that would unequivocally support his agenda. To understand why, we will have to examine the fine details of political argument in 1909, when Briand's program was announced in major speeches, through the election of May 1910, to the autumn of that year, when a railway workers'

strike gravely weakened his position. The “realist” agenda was in the end compromised by the “realism” needed to hold his government and his majority together.

Nevertheless, this moment of hope highlights several important points. First, the intellectual debate was never as polarized around classic right or left ideological positions as some historiography would have us believe. Second, the reform agenda as it was formulated in intellectual circles did have an impact *on* politics, even if in 1910 it could not fulfill its agenda *through* politics. We should not dismiss the movement behind Briand just because Briand himself was unable to achieve his goals. Many characters were influential in formulating opinion in the interwar period, and from there, as Nicolas Roussellier has pointed out, connections exist to reform agendas later in the century.⁹ Third, the optimism that Briand inspired should not be cynically dismissed. The reaction to Briand is important in itself and tells us about the way politics and political ideas were received among the wider newspaper-reading public. Pessimism has often dominated modern French history, especially that of the 1930s. So perhaps the time is now ripe for a consideration of one moment of hope.

The belle époque “reform constituency,” as Stone has described it, was a middle-class movement for stabilizing class relations in the face of revolution.¹⁰ Her presentation of the movement for *solidarité* (solidarity, between classes) is convincing, particularly in light of some recent approaches that have distorted our understanding of these political reformers by equating their social reform with counterrevolution.¹¹ Nevertheless, even Stone’s analysis has some problems. Social peace was a goal; but this was only one part of a broader reconceptualization of the republican state. Some of the young intellectuals who argued over Briand’s program in 1909–10 saw social reform as the most essential element; others argued for state reforms such as administrative decentralization or electoral reform. But both were more interested in adapting the state to modern problems than in self-interested class politics, however enlightened. Between social reform plans and state reform plans, therefore, there was a community of interests, the “reform constituency,” that promoted the reconciliation of class, religious, and politi-

⁹ Nicolas Roussellier, “La contestation du modèle républicain dans les années trente: La réforme de l’Etat,” in *Le modèle républicain*, ed. Serge Berstein and Odile Rudelle (Paris, 1992).

¹⁰ Stone, *Search for Social Peace*, x–xi.

¹¹ E.g., Sanford Elwitt, *The Third Republic Defended: Bourgeois Reform in France, 1880–1914* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1986).

cal differences. In this section we examine the reform movement as it coalesced around 1900, during the premierships of René Waldeck-Rousseau. We then examine three aspects of the movement, stressing that it benefited from an internal coherence that one commentator, Bérénger, articulated with particular skill. If we are to test the coherence of Briand's governmental program, it is vital to understand the intellectual movement that prepared the way for his campaign of *apaisement*.

Waldeck-Rousseau, erstwhile disciple of Léon Gambetta and a highly respected figure in legal circles, reluctantly took the position of *président du conseil* in 1899 as the Dreyfus affair unraveled.¹² Waldeck-Rousseau is one of those figures who are often crowded out of our understanding of this period: characters such as Jean Jaurès, Georges Clemenceau, and Maurice Barrès seem more colorful and thus more important. Yet for our understanding of the "reform constituency" and the ongoing projects they promoted, Waldeck-Rousseau is crucial. It was not his ideological parentage in the opportunist party of the 1880s so much as his own intellectual disciples around 1900 that provide the key to understanding what his government was about. Around him gathered an intriguing collection of young intellectuals who called themselves the "Génération."¹³ It is true that, from this group, a connection to the idea of middle-class defense certainly existed: Maurice Colrat went on to found the Association de la Défense des Classes Moyennes (Association for the Defense of the Middle Classes) in 1909. Waldeck-Rousseau, however, had a much wider agenda. He and the most important of his lieutenants, the Socialist Joseph Paul-Boncour, wanted to move on from the period when political questions had been tackled using abstract principles and replace these with pragmatic or realist solutions. Thus the reformers were connected by their methods to the opportunist politicians of the 1880s, especially Gambetta and Jules Ferry; through them, their roots may be traced to the new science of sociology, and to the thought of Auguste Comte in particular. This school of thought stressed that the manner of reform was if anything more important than the solutions proposed. For example, the rapid changes brought about by the Constituent Assembly of 1789–91 had been dangerous because they had proceeded from first principles. However much one approved of the ideals of 1789, those could not in themselves provide a detailed program that would reorganize the state

¹² See, in particular, Paul-Boncour, *Entre deux guerres*, vol. 1, chap. 3.

¹³ Louis Guitard, *La petite histoire de la IIIe République: Souvenirs de Maurice Colrat* (Paris, 1959), esp. chaps. 1–2; Christine Manigand, *Henry de Jouvenel* (Limoges, 2000).

for the twentieth century. This concern was summed up by the reformers with the term *politique réaliste*.

Paul-Boncour became the preeminent theorist of this movement through the publication in 1900 of his thesis on economic federalism. In it he argued that the republic must evolve by encouraging the growth of professional associations. Organized where necessary on regional lines, this associative life would regenerate the republic.¹⁴ This work established his reputation, and the Socialist minister Alexandre Millerand was among the eminent politicians who ensured, through a subscription list, that it was published and widely read in high circles.¹⁵ In 1903 Paul-Boncour, an early member of the Fédération Régionaliste Française (French Regionalist Federation [FRF]), would open a remarkable debate over the question of decentralization, in which his principal opponent was the neomonarchist Charles Maurras.¹⁶ Thus, for Paul-Boncour, social reform and state reform were connected: both were part of what he called the “rejuvenation,” or “reorganization” of the republic. Ultimately, he would see social changes as preeminent, and he did not give Briand his unequivocal support in 1910. Like Briand, however, Paul-Boncour was guided by a concern for social and political reconciliation—his 1909 entry into Parliament took place only when other republican candidates had given way, allowing him a barely contested election.¹⁷

The “Génération” represented a spectrum of reform. André Tardieu, the frustrated reformer of the interwar years, worked alongside Paul-Boncour in Waldeck-Rousseau’s offices in the Interior Ministry.¹⁸ In the first decade of the 1900s Tardieu was an eloquent advocate for the moderate right-wing end of reformism. His article in *Le temps* in response to Paul-Boncour’s decentralist manifesto of 1903 showed that he was certainly not going to let a Socialist like his friend Paul-Boncour claim all the decentralist kudos.¹⁹ Tardieu shared Paul-Boncour’s view that a political *réalisme* was needed to allow for pragmatic reforms of the state. He capitalized on the widespread use of the term *réalisme* in the

¹⁴ Joseph Paul-Boncour, *Le fédéralisme économique: Etude sur les rapports de l'individu et des groupements professionnels* (Paris, 1900).

¹⁵ Correspondence in Archives Nationales (AN), 424 AP (papiers Paul-Boncour), 1 (doctorat).

¹⁶ The opening salvo appeared in *La renaissance latine*, July 15, 1903. This article and a number of responses to it, including those of Tardieu, Clemenceau, and Maurras himself appeared as a collection: Joseph Paul-Boncour and Charles Maurras, *Un débat nouveau sur la République et la décentralisation* (Toulouse, 1905). A new edition came out in 1923.

¹⁷ AN 424 AP, 1 (élection 1909).

¹⁸ The other members of the “Generation” included Maurice Colrat and Alfred de Monzie. See Guitard, *Petite histoire de la IIIe République*, 26–27, 44.

¹⁹ Reprinted in Paul-Boncour and Maurras, *Débat nouveau*.

1920s, as he developed his own agenda for reform, prior to becoming prime minister in 1929.²⁰

Another member of the “Génération” was Henri de Jouvenel, who, like his younger brother Robert, became a leading advocate for electoral reform. This advocacy, like Paul-Boncour’s and Tardieu’s, was inspired by a larger belief in the need for a rejuvenation of the republic. In what became a classic critique of the Third Republic, Robert de Jouvenel expressed his generation’s frustration at Parliament’s failure to deal with administrative and electoral reform, as well as the institution of an income tax and the need for more developed systems of trade unions.²¹ Henri de Jouvenel connected the state reformers to high society. More of a dilettante than Tardieu or Paul-Boncour, he nevertheless campaigned for reform and praised Paul-Boncour lavishly in a pamphlet published when the latter became minister of labor in 1911.²²

During Waldeck-Rousseau’s three years in government, the issue that most inspired a reform-minded intellectual like Paul-Boncour was the Law on Associations, passed in 1901. This law has a threefold importance for our analysis: first, it shows the nature of the reforms on which the “reform constituency” concentrated; second, it situates these reformers in a longer ideological lineage, underscoring the coherence and depth of their ideas; and third, it demonstrates how the reformers connected thoughts about social relationships to thoughts about the nature of the state. Indeed, the underrating of reformers like Waldeck-Rousseau and Briand stems largely from a failure to hold the ideas of social reform and state reform alongside each other. The Law on Associations was the work of men for whom these two ideas were interwoven. This law forces us to accept that, by conceptualizing the two problems as one larger question about the need for a rejuvenated republic, the reformers sought neither a middle-class counterrevolution nor an authoritarian coup (which Tardieu came to support only in the 1930s). For Waldeck-Rousseau and Paul-Boncour in 1901, as for Briand in 1910, the fundamental aim was to rejuvenate the republic by reorganizing it.

The Law on Associations has sometimes been cast as the prelude to the separation of church and state, which dominated the agenda after Waldeck-Rousseau resigned in 1902. In reality, however, the law was designed to adapt the state to new social imperatives by opening a channel between the state and the working class. Paul-Boncour described

²⁰ François Monnet, *Refaire la république: André Tardieu, une dérive réactionnaire* (Paris, 1993), esp. pt. 1.

²¹ Robert de Jouvenel, *La république des camarades* (Paris, 1914), 57.

²² M. Le Blond, *Les idées de M. J. Paul-Boncour*, preface by Henri de Jouvenel (Paris, 1911).

it as an “organic law, which we were very wrong to transform, after [Waldeck-Rousseau], into a combative law.”²³ The law allowed for the development of associations within the indivisible republic. It called into question the notion of the unitary state, which held that nothing could come between the individual and the machinery of government. Since it addressed the problem of class division, it was seen as beginning a new vogue of republican reform. Not through the lay education system alone would the republic implant itself in French society: the proponents of this law believed that it needed to revive organs at an intermediary level, allowing unions to play a beneficial role in society. Paul-Boncour had insisted in his thesis that this associationism was nothing less than a reorganization of the economic and social life of France on federal lines, where trades unions and regional assemblies would emerge, establishing links among themselves at the regional level and thus becoming powerful partners in the state. The Law on Associations therefore began the process of adapting the legal framework of French jurisprudence to promote the reorganization and rejuvenation of the republic.

We will see shortly how the personalities of 1901 reemerged in 1909–10, but we should also notice the ongoing importance of the Law on Associations itself. Indeed, during the first Briand government, there was a feeling that the full benefits of the 1901 law had not yet been drawn. In October 1909 Alexandre Millerand (whom Briand had appointed minister of commerce) ruefully recounted how a visitor from the Canadian government had expressed surprise at the persistently problematic legal and political status of trades unions in France. Inspired by Waldeck-Rousseau, Canada had formulated its own law on associations and seemed to be reaping far greater benefits than France.²⁴ Thus when the young intellectuals around Waldeck-Rousseau achieved positions of greater influence, the Law on Associations remained an essential reference point.

The intellectual web behind this reform constituency is apparently sturdy, consisting in a reformist “middle way” between a desire to refound the corporative society of the ancien régime and the unitarism of Jacobin ideology. Certainly, an intellectual parentage can easily be found for this movement in the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville,

²³ Paul-Boncour, *Entre deux guerres*, 1:120. See also 1:30–32. In 1901 Paul-Boncour wrote an extended apologia for the law in the avant-garde journal *Revue naturiste* (first three numbers of 1901).

²⁴ Speech given by Millerand to the electors of the twelfth arrondissement of Paris, on the twentieth anniversary of his election to parliament: reported in *L'Action*, Oct. 24, 1909.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Auguste Comte, Frédéric Le Play, and, closer to hand, Jules Ferry, Léon Bourgeois, and reformist Socialists such as Alfred Fouillée. Yet the ideas promoted by the young intellectuals of the new century did not impinge on political debates in a straightforward way. Different participants in the reform debate would take up different positions in different parties. The other dominant issues of the day, particularly the question of the church, divided the reformers, and it would appear that the moments when reformers came together, 1900–1901 and 1909–10, were rare. Yet only by putting these moments at center stage can we assess the significance of reform proponents such as Briand. We must therefore pass over the period 1902–9 and examine the reform constituency as it reemerged during a frustrating time for republicans of all stripes.

This time came with the end of Clemenceau's first government in 1909. Clemenceau, the great critic of the unreformed republic in the late nineteenth century, had himself become a force preventing change: as the *premier flic* (top cop) of France, he repressed strikes and scorned regionalists while failing to reform social relations or administrative structures. After his resignation, the twin themes of the reform constituency, state reform and social reform, reemerged. Between 1902 and 1909, however, these themes had been developed outside the political arena. The important features of this development include the regionalist movement and the campaign for electoral reform, two elements of the movement for state reform, and the "Comité de la démocratie sociale," which campaigned for social reform. Thanks to these groups, questions of state reform and social reform began to figure prominently in political manifestos. Moreover, all three had connections to the debate that Briand incited in 1909–10. Having dealt with the three movements in turn, we will examine the career of Bérenger, who showed how state reform and social reform could be married.

From 1900 to 1909 the regionalist movement worked hard to penetrate political opinion²⁵ but was hindered somewhat by its determination to remain nonpartisan. The names elected to the FRF's honorary committee reveal its eclecticism: they included Barrès, Charles Longuet (the son-in-law of Karl Marx), the old Radical deputy Charles Beauquier,²⁶ the moderate Louis Marin, and the legitimist Breton deputy the Marquis de l'Estourbeillon. In its early days the FRF was a somewhat unfocused organization. But its secretary-general, the journalist

²⁵ See Wright, *Regionalist Movement in France*, chap. 5.

²⁶ Charles Beauquier, Radical Socialist deputy of the Doubs, was chairman of the Chamber's Decentralization Commission under the Clemenceau government.

and teacher Jean Charles-Brun, ensured that by 1910 the FRF had taken a positive and pragmatic direction. The regionalists organized conferences that had limited and precise objectives: to debate the economic problems of the Loire Valley, for example, or to teach regional literature and history in schools. Thus regionalism had a twin face: emerging from provincial cultural and literary organizations and their avant-gardes in Paris, it acquired a practical outlook that could affect political debates.²⁷

When Radical Socialists asked, “Where next?” after the crisis over the separation of church and state, a project of administrative *decentralisation*, taking as a model the “living” regions, with their defined economic and cultural identities, was a worthy part of the program.²⁸ But the FRF had not succeeded in convincing all politicians of the Left that it was a truly republican enterprise. Charles-Brun suggested in 1905 that the first task of regionalism was to unite those regionalists who thought like Paul-Boncour and those who thought like Maurras. For him, the question of regime was in fact less fundamental than the question of what sort of republic or monarchy one envisaged: unitary or decentralized.²⁹ Thus Maurras was rarely attacked head-on by the regionalists, and when Briand himself seemed to advocate regional decentralization, the debate was confused by a constant stream of articles in *Action française* arguing that republican regionalism was a misnomer. This did not help the regionalists’ cause with Radicals who advocated republican defense. Even so, regionalism had won over enough converts by 1910 for the Maurras-induced confusion to be less a problem than such practical questions as how the decentralization process might work, what shape the regions would take, and how such a reform might affect institutions like the Senate.

In 1910 these questions were gathered under the heading “Réforme administrative.” It was “Réforme électorale,” however, that drew the most attention. Like regionalism, the “RPéiste” movement (RP standing for *représentation proportionnelle*) led by Charles Benoist was eclectic in its advocates and suffered from the technical difficulties of constructing a detailed proposal for reform. The RPéistes argued that electoral reform, based on a system of proportional representation, was part of the program of republican rejuvenation.³⁰ Their histori-

²⁷ Jean Charles-Brun, *Le régionalisme* (Paris, 1911), 37.

²⁸ Serge Berstein does not pursue the connection, made by the Radical Ferdinand Buisson, between electoral reform and regional decentralization, twin pillars of state reform: see Berstein, *Histoire du Parti radical*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1980), 1:58–67.

²⁹ Edmond Lizop, “De la terre natale à l’humanité fédérale,” *Politique* 37 (1967): 144.

³⁰ Throughout 1907 the Radical Party consulted its members on electoral reform, produc-

cal reference point was Gambetta.³¹ In the 1880s the Chamber had put aside proportional representation to follow a two-stage constituency election model. Yet Gambetta had clearly outlined the view that the system most appropriate to a mature republic was one in which all parties were equitably represented.³² The movement drew support from men who believed that the achievement of universal suffrage was not enough in itself. Jean Jaurès and Ferdinand Buisson were among the more notable figures who supported the campaign when a formal parliamentary group was formed in 1907.³³ It was under Briand in 1909 that the Chamber first debated proportional representation in detail.

If state reform attracted a variety of intellectuals, those who concentrated on social reform tended to have more clearly defined political positions. We turn now from the regionalists and RPéistes to a group that best represents the social reform theme within the intellectual movement. The Comité de la Démocratie Sociale was founded in 1906 as a “study group” bringing together Radicals, Radical Socialists, and independent socialists who sought a new agenda for the republic. The challenge was to move on from the question of republican defense to more constructive measures. Joseph Paul-Boncour, a founding member, outlined the Comité’s program: nationalization of certain industries, a state insurance scheme, unions for state employees, and obligatory collective bargaining in industry.³⁴ These reforms were designed to bring the growing syndicalist movement closer to the state. Paul-Boncour conceived them as furthering the work of Waldeck-Rousseau’s government by developing possibilities opened up by the Law on Associations.

The two most important members of the Comité were the Socialist journalist Léon Parsons and a young law lecturer, later an eminent economist, Etienne Antonelli. Parsons had become known in the 1890s as an advocate of reformist socialism. Around the turn of the century he became an important figure in a reform socialist movement called L’Oeuvre.³⁵ Paul-Boncour had attended their meetings regularly, and with his help Parsons brought together Radical Socialist reformers as the 1902–6 legislature drew to a close. Parsons was the group’s publi-

ing a majority in favor of limited change, with some clearly against and others, led by Buisson, strongly supportive of proportional representation. Berstein, *Histoire du Parti radical*, 1:58.

³¹ In *De Gambetta à Briand* (Paris, 1914), the commentator Georges Béret emphasized the solidity of the historical connection.

³² Correspondence and notes of Gambetta were passed on to Briand as he studied the question in 1909. See Briand papers, vol. 8.

³³ E. Le Chartier, *La France et son parlement* (Paris, 1911), 1084.

³⁴ Joseph Paul-Boncour, “Le comité de la démocratie sociale,” *Le censeur*, Oct. 6, 1906.

³⁵ Le Blond, *Idées de Paul-Boncour*, 24–25.

cist: it was he who suggested the founding of a weekly newspaper, *La démocratie sociale*.

Antonelli had a greater aptitude for discussion of political economy. In 1911 he gave classes at the Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques et Sociales on “Les actions de travail dans les sociétés anonymes à participation ouvrière.”³⁶ His studies on political economy and socialist philosophy gave *La démocratie sociale* a serious academic tone. In 1924 he was elected to Parliament from the Haute-Savoie. While his inclinations were clearly on the left (throughout the period he wrote for *Le peuple*, organ of the Confédération Générale du Travail), it was above all Antonelli’s status as a distinguished economist that defined his political contribution: he reported the budget for social insurance from 1924 to 1931.

The loose and anonymous group of left-leaning politicians that originally met at the Comité in 1906 included many disaffected Radicals. Yet the struggle to make Radicals more aware of the need for social reform did not take place in the 1906–10 legislature, for all the pressure that Paul-Boncour, Antonelli, and Parsons had applied at the outset. It was not easy to oppose the strikebreaking Clemenceau when their own patrons, notably Briand himself, held cabinet seats. Only when Clemenceau fell in 1909 did the group resurface. The bureau of the Comité organized a general assembly at the Café Cardinal, their old meeting place, for July 1909.³⁷ *La démocratie sociale* appeared a few months later, its first number coinciding fortuitously with a major speech given by Briand at Périgueux.³⁸ With Briand at the head of government, the Comité could now claim—as it never could in 1906—to be a discussion group with a real chance of influencing policy. No longer, its members hoped, would their plans emerge in projects buried in those “ossuaries of the republic,” the commissions of the Chamber; now they could provide the intellectual cohesion behind a whole governmental program.

The first issue of the newspaper reiterated the principles that underlay all discussion of social or state reform. It was not proportional representation or collective bargaining per se that mattered but the process by which such measures were introduced. “We do not want to create a new party,” wrote the editor; “rather, we want to bring new

³⁶ A special issue of the *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale* in 1953 was devoted to Antonelli. See esp. J. Morimi-Comby, “La carrière enseignante d’Etienne Antonelli,” and J. Milhau, “L’action politique d’Etienne Antonelli.” See also Antonelli, *La démocratie sociale devant les idées présentes* (Paris, 1911).

³⁷ Etienne Antonelli, *La démocratie sociale: Un programme d’avant-guerre, pour une politique d’après-guerre* (Paris, 1919), 21.

³⁸ The first number was published on Oct. 16, 1909, less than a week after Briand’s speech.

life to the political activity of French democracy.”³⁹ It was the utility of reforms rather than their following a particular political line that defined their interest, as the manifesto in this first issue emphasized: “By thus preparing, without party bias, the materials needed by lawmakers of the future, we will be more useful than if we contented ourselves with entering into the sterile struggle of political and economic doctrines where, so far, the great republican parties have wasted themselves.”⁴⁰

Two months later the Comité drew up a manifesto for the coming general elections. It was published in their journal under the heading “La politique réaliste.”⁴¹ There was more to this than merely a platform designed to unite a left and center-left majority, in a tactical restructuring of the Radicals and independent socialists. “Realism” defined an approach to politics that steered away from the rhetoric of classic Radicalism: “This state of mind is a fear and rejection of any a priori formula imposing itself on governmental and legislative action. . . . the government must place itself face-to-face with present reality, and consider the social body as a living organism.”⁴²

On the question of which reform, in this “realist” approach, was the most pressing, the Comité emphasized social reform over reform of the state. But the Comité was not the only part of the reform movement that hoped to gain ground under Briand. Some of the force of the Comité’s argument was lost when the press fell to debating in minute detail the question of proportional representation. Paul-Boncour was by early 1910 writing a weekly article in the Socialist journal *La lanterne*, where strong opposition to electoral reform was often voiced. He had to steer his articles away from the issue of state reform. Not all of his readers would have seen the connection between his moderate socialism, on the one hand, and regionalism or the RPéiste campaign, on the other. Meanwhile, Parsons and Antonelli turned to a specific question, “Les actions du travail dans les sociétés de participation ouvrière.”⁴³ They argued that social reform had to proceed by forging links between workers and employers, to the workers’ advantage. Participation meant participation in the fruits of industry. On this question, one of their principal authorities was Briand himself, who in 1906 had led a discussion about it at the Comité.

The intellectual who brought together the twin themes of the re-

³⁹ *La démocratie sociale*, Oct. 16, 1909.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *La démocratie sociale*, Dec. 11, 1909.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Etienne Antonelli, *Les actions du travail* (Paris, 1912).

form movement was Bérenger. He was not, so far as we can tell, a key member of the Comité de la Démocratie Sociale—he was a little older, and perhaps the generational difference was as important as any.⁴⁴ Like other reform advocates, Bérenger had reflected not merely on the actual reforms that were needed but on the methods of republican rejuvenation. He insisted that the strength of the reform movement lay in its pragmatic approach to change. In a 1907 lecture Bérenger argued that there could be no specific recipe for social reform, but that gradualism was absolutely essential: “The *libre penseur* (freethinker) does not bring the complete solution to the social problem; he works little by little, with the majority of the country, to bring the masses, uneducated and unaware, to an understanding of social problems and from there to increasing the happiness of each individual.”⁴⁵ Reform demanded laborious attention and study, but the results of such work would be more fruitful than those produced in the airy castles of doctrinaire Socialists or reactionaries. Bérenger, then, saw both social and state reforms as rooted in a realist political practice—that is, as rejecting the methods if not the ideals of the constitution makers in 1789.

It is important to keep an open mind as to the political impact of different elements of the reform movement. Through his newspaper *L'action*, Bérenger pressed the government on the necessity of republican rejuvenation. Yet he bridged the gap between intellectual and political debates in another, fundamental way. Bérenger's Radical credentials were as solid as any: between 1901 and 1906 he had established himself as one of the most virulent anticlericals in the French press. The death of his brother, fighting for France overseas, inspired Bérenger to conceive a passionate belief in the ideal of the unified, national republic.⁴⁶ National fulfillment would come through the triumph of the freethinking republic over the church and the Right. There can have been few more virulent scourges of the church than Bérenger: the lectures and articles he produced throughout the separation crisis channeled a torrent of criticism of Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular.⁴⁷ Like Paul-Boncour, Bérenger had been a “leader of youth” throughout the Dreyfus affair and afterward. His newspaper, *L'action*, was founded specifically to promote uncompromising anticlericalism.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Bérenger was president of the Association Général des Etudiants de Paris when Paul-Boncour joined it in the 1890s; Paul-Boncour, *Entre deux guerres*, 1:60.

⁴⁵ Speech to the Université Populaire de Lille, delivered Dec. 1, 1907. Henry Bérenger, *Pages et discours de libre pensée, dix ans de bataille (1898–1908)* (Paris, 1908), 413.

⁴⁶ Henry Bérenger, *La conscience nationale* (Paris, 1898), 321.

⁴⁷ Henry Bérenger, *Christianisme et libre-pensée* (Paris, 1903).

⁴⁸ See C. Bellanger et al., *Histoire générale de la presse française*, vol. 3 (1871–1940) (Paris, 1972), 366.

Yet as the separation crisis died down, Bérenger was one of the first Radicals or Radical Socialists to point out that *libre pensée* was in danger of collapsing in on itself, still fighting battles already won. As early as 1901 he had embraced the call for electoral reform on the basis of proportional representation.⁴⁹ In 1906 he demanded that the Radicals turn from the religious to the social question.⁵⁰ The battle was now between proletariat and plutocracy, he argued. The 1906–10 legislature had to inaugurate the social republic by introducing working-class pensions, an income tax, and the development of a more organized network of unions. By 1909 Bérenger had associated himself clearly with Briand's agenda.⁵¹ Thus the notion that the reform movement, as led by Briand, was merely an attempt to move the governmental center of gravity to the right, toward the Catholic-friendly *progressistes*, is undermined by the evidence of Bérenger. Moreover, he saw the two streams of reform, state reform and social reform, as complementary. Great emphasis thus needs to be placed on the articles Bérenger wrote during Briand's first government, as they allow us to sharpen our focus on the intellectual movement and witness, close up, the application of this intellectual movement in the arena of political debate. Bérenger is a crucial figure for treating Briand's concept of *apaisement* seriously.

Thus, by the autumn of 1909, when Briand was encouraging the debate on state reform, a large and diverse constituency of reform-minded intellectuals had emerged. It might be questioned how much bearing this movement had on politics. Nevertheless, through the complex web of their personal connections, we can see Bérenger and Antonelli, for example, exercising an important influence on political debate. Unlike some intellectual movements of the period (one thinks perhaps of *Action française* or the supporters of the anarchist Gustave Hervé), these men had a personal impact on the heart of the republican debate. Reformism, an intellectual movement, drew its support from the Left Bank academic and artistic world, but its chief proponents were close to the leading politicians of the day and helped form opinion through their journalism. Many of them played a role in the higher administration, as did Paul-Boncour, *chef de cabinet* (head of administration) in the newly founded Ministry of Labor in 1906. Above all, they had developed a formula that laid out the connection between different reforms, such as regional decentralization, electoral reform, or the

⁴⁹ Bérenger, *Pages et discours de libre pensée*, 291.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 345: article titled "Après les dieux, les maîtres."

⁵¹ He was greatly impressed by Briand's speeches at Neubourg and Périgueux. See *L'action*, Mar. 31 and Nov. 11, 1909.

building of new contractual relationships in the workplace, and underscored all this with a call for the rejuvenation of the republic. As we shall see after analyzing the debates of 1910 more closely, the main issue facing this reform movement was that of reconciliation. It was not social so much as religious reconciliation that caused problems.

In any consideration of Briand, the question of religious reconciliation naturally takes center stage. Briand first came to the attention of the public at large as the man charged with applying the separation laws, which he did with a deliberate policy of conciliation. *Conciliation* would remain his watchword in 1909. The development of his new agenda, centered on the term *apaisement*, has commonly been analyzed in three important speeches he gave in Neubourg in March 1909, in Périgueux in October 1909, and in Saint-Chamond in April 1910. In the work of his principal biographer, Georges Suarez, Briand emerges as a supple politician testing the water of state reform through certain popular ideas.⁵² What we do not see, however, is the intellectual cohesion that underpinned these ideas. That is why we have dwelled so long on the reform constituency prior to 1909, leaving our central character in the wings until the serious and cohesive nature of these ideas has been established.

A century after his appearance on the French political scene, Briand remains a poorly known figure.⁵³ If any part of his career has been studied in detail, it is his activity on behalf of the League of Nations from 1919 to 1932. The advocate of the general strike of 1900, the voice of moderation in the separation crisis of 1905, the orator who seduced the Chamber on so many occasions in the prewar years are written about in passing. Suarez was himself discredited by his activity during the Second World War, and Briand's reputation suffered as a result.⁵⁴ Even at the time of his death in 1932, however, Briand had receded from the center stage of politics. His efforts for international cooperation in the 1920s had seemed to lead nowhere. A significant leap of the imagination is needed to overcome these later impressions and revive the sense of optimism that Briand inspired in 1909–10. The writer Vercors recounts a conversation between his parents and a Hungarian diplomat in 1909: "My parents were sorry that Europe had, for

⁵² Georges Suarez, *Briand: Sa vie, son oeuvre, avec son journal et de nombreux documents inédits*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1938–52).

⁵³ Madeleine Rebérioux, *La république radicale? (1898–1914)* (Paris, 1975), 13.

⁵⁴ Jacques Bariéty, "Aristide Briand: Les raisons d'un oubli," in *Le plan Briand d'union fédérale européenne*, ed. Antoine Fleury (Bern, 1998), 4.

the resolution of its conflicts, such mediocre governors. At this, in his deep voice, the King's councillor protested: 'You, you have Briand! [*sic*].'"⁵⁵

To the Socialist Party, Briand was already a turncoat, and his actions in 1910 would only exacerbate this sense of betrayal. He had entered the world of political journalism writing for *La lanterne* in the 1890s, and he was elected from Saint-Etienne, the industrial mining area, in 1902. Yet his acceptance of a ministerial portfolio under Clemenceau suggested, as he had done in his work on the separation laws, that here was a bourgeois lawyer, much beloved of the ladies of the theater, who had other agendas than the class struggle. Nevertheless, the wave of enthusiasm that greeted Briand's declarations at Neubourg, and particularly the first government statement of July 1909, has often been dismissed. "As soon as we talked of appeasement and détente, people put their faith in us," Briand declared at Saint-Chamond. "Why? Because this is a time when the country feels a great, an irresistible, longing for union, concord, and fraternity."⁵⁶ He was not making this up: letters that survive from this period indicate that republicans of all colors saw promise in his program.⁵⁷ In the country at large he inspired hope and confidence.

To follow the themes of the reform constituency through Briand's first government, we must consider both the intellectual movement outside the chamber and the political debate animated by Briand himself. Only by doing so can we understand fully the central problem facing Briand: how to turn a corpus of reform ideas that had acquired great cohesion in intellectual circles into a reform program that would hold together in Parliament. The RPéistes and regionalists, the social reformers, and Bérenger himself all greeted Briand's moment of hope with excitement and some trepidation, as they witnessed their ideas being taken up in the wider press and in Parliament. Thus the individuals we have examined in the first half of this article reemerge as players on the fringe of the political debate that concerns us from here on. An important subtheme is Briand's enigmatic position between intellectuals and politicians. In trying to understand this position, we are in fact addressing one of the quintessential problems of Third Republic politics: the relationship between Parliament and the politically educated class outside Parliament.

In March 1909, at Neubourg, Briand astonished the political world

⁵⁵ Vercors, *Moi, Aristide Briand: Essai d'autoportrait* (Brussels, 1993), 10.

⁵⁶ Suarez, *Briand*, 2:240.

⁵⁷ The correspondence between Briand and Reinach is particularly telling. See Briand papers, vol. 27, and below.

by talking of participation and social democracy as a means to reconciliation. It was Benoist and the Right who first accused him of political skullduggery, a charge that would be so often repeated by politicians—and later, historians—of the Left.⁵⁸ The social Catholic politician Albert de Mun peevishly noted that the new government was taking up many of his ideas. But the Radicals who had become utterly disenchanted with Combes, as they had grown anxious about Clemenceau as the nation's "top cop," were elated. Independent socialists such as Millebrand were not difficult to bring on board. The up-and-coming Radical Edouard Herriot saw the program as substantive and serious.⁵⁹

At Périgueux Briand developed his themes, particularly that of workers participating in the fruits of their labor. He envisaged a much greater organization of labor, where unions would become "marchés de travail" (work exchanges). It was Briand's remarks on the "mares stagnantes," however, that made this speech memorable. The little ponds were the arrondissements with their cossetted deputies and their petty infighting; the wind that blew over them was that of state reform. To suggest, as did David E. Sumler, that this was no more than the window dressing for a cynical attempt to build a coalition that would keep the Radical Socialist Joseph Caillaux out of office, building bridges to the right under the cloak of *apaisement*, is to attribute to Briand a level of subtlety that even he did not fully merit.⁶⁰ This speech was a sincere attempt to describe to the electorate the hope that Briand had for the future. Gabriel Hanotaux's *Carnets* substantiates this less skeptical interpretation: "He seriously wanted, I think, to bring together all the republican party; he had no illusions about the force that moderates would bring him. But I think that he wanted above all to obtain their support for social laws that the Radical Party, meager and fractious, would refuse him."⁶¹ The complication arose because Briand developed policies on the basis of their necessity and the benefits they seemed to offer the French nation as a whole. This realism was in fact at the heart of the program of state reform, and it explains why Briand was greeted with such enthusiasm: the Radicals' time in office had been disappointing because Combes and Clemenceau had clung doggedly to the abstract principles of revolutionary republicanism, avoiding the real problems of society.

⁵⁸ Charles Benoist, *Souvenirs*, vol. 3, 1902–33 (Paris, 1934), 158.

⁵⁹ Marie-Georges Dèzes, "Participation et démocratie sociale: L'expérience Briand de 1909," *Le mouvement social*, no. 87 (1974): 114, 117.

⁶⁰ David E. Sumler, "Domestic Influences on the Nationalist Revival in France, 1909–1914," *French Historical Studies* 6 (1970): 517–37.

⁶¹ Gabriel Hanotaux, *Carnets (1907–1925)*, ed. G. Dethan (Paris, 1982), 42.

As the 1906–10 legislature drew to a close, many young reformers expressed their disappointment in its achievements. Clemenceau's confrontation with the winegrowers of the Languedoc had turned him away from the regional reform projects he had earlier condoned.⁶² One major reform, the creation of France's first workers' pension scheme, had passed through the Chamber, only to be left languishing in the Senate until the very last moment.⁶³ Moreover, the bureaus of the Chamber were filling up with such projects as the decentralization commission chaired by Charles Beauquier. This commission, set up by Clemenceau, had produced a project to which some Radicals seemed favorable.⁶⁴ Nothing had come of it, however, and it remained to be seen what Briand would do with administrative reform and the other reforms that were increasingly pressing for attention, such as a new statute on the position and authority of trade unions. In particular, Briand had equivocated on the issue of the "mares stagnantes," adjourning further debate on electoral reform until the question was better understood. This led both Benoist and later historians to see Briand's political maneuvering during this period as evidence that he was not fully committed to "RP," and that it was for him no more than a slogan.⁶⁵ Briand did believe in the need for gradual reform, however. It was in keeping with his conception of the main problem of politics: that lasting reform could never come from projects imposed rapidly, a priori, on the nation. His correspondence reveals not only that he took more than just a passing interest in electoral reform but that he had occasional contacts with Benoist himself, which the latter's memoirs do not recall.⁶⁶

The intellectual thrust behind the debate that Briand animated was provided by Bérenger, who in his review of the Périgueux speech advocated all of Briand's measures, notably the idea of the trade union

⁶² See Clemenceau's article in Paul-Boncour and Maurras, *Débat nouveau*.

⁶³ In *La lanterne*, Mar. 5, 1910, Paul-Boncour described this as an unexpected development that gave the legislature a better end-of-term report than it merited.

⁶⁴ Cruppi, in *Le matin*, Dec. 20, 1909. Cruppi had moved from progressivism in 1898 to membership in the Radical Socialist group in 1910—an evolution that provides a clue to his interest in reforms about which the Jacobins of his party were more nervous. J. Joly, ed., *Dictionnaire des parlementaires français* (Paris, 1960), 1192.

⁶⁵ Benoist would, in his memoirs, accuse Briand of not being a true supporter of electoral reform. Like the adept parliamentarian he was, he had simply moistened his finger to find "the direction from which the wind was blowing on the stagnant ponds" (Benoist, *Souvenirs*, 3:158). Benoist's memoirs, however, are notorious for the bitterness with which the failed reformer, who had by the time of writing become sympathetic to the extreme Right, sneered at the core of the republican party. Briand was, moreover, an easy target in 1934, and not only because he was no longer alive to answer the criticisms: the rise of Hitler had shown his international policy to have been overly optimistic, and this colored the judgment of writers, such as Benoist, whose memories of the prewar period had become clouded with disappointment.

⁶⁶ See Briand papers, vol. 25.

as a “work exchange” in which capital and labor could cooperate. Bérenger turned his criticism on the Radical Party, which, he said, “must rejuvenate, renew itself; it must stop feeding on narrow formulas, worrying itself about tendencies and subtendencies, which perhaps had their purpose yesterday but today no longer correspond to the reality of things.”⁶⁷ The Radical Party was meeting at Nantes that very week, and Bérenger connected Briand’s speech with a published letter program addressed to the Radicals by Léon Bourgeois.⁶⁸ The battle line in political circles was now clear. On one side were Camille Pelletan, Emile Combes, and many Radicals for whom the business of the government consisted largely in the strengthening of republican mores through the defense of the education system. On the other were some Radicals, such as Ferdinand Buisson and Léon Bourgeois, with a number of independent socialists led by Briand himself. In his New Year’s Day article of 1910, Bérenger described the two poles of the republican Left in terms of the governments of the previous year—a year of two halves: “The first half was filled by the last phase of the Clemenceau ministry, that is, by the burying of fiscal reform, by the strike of communications workers, by mass sackings of civil servants, by multiple vexations against the whole world of labor, and finally by the fall of the dictator. . . . The second was marked by the inauguration of a new politics of social appeasement and republican détente that spontaneously reestablished discipline in the administration and freedom in the country.”⁶⁹

Between these two poles, Clemenceau’s republican defense and Briand’s republican appeasement, many politicians could vacillate. This was partly because Briand himself was not a doctrinaire advocate of any specific measure—he was too cautious. Not all who might have been expected to side with him did so. One might have thought that Paul-Boncour would align himself directly with the government, but he did not. His own principal sponsor, Maurice Bertheaux, was one of the government’s harshest critics during the debate of June 1910. Paul-Boncour remained connected to his old friends from *La démocratie sociale*, but he would eventually attempt to found his own grouping, situated more clearly on the socialist left.⁷⁰ Briand had to strike the right balance: the rhetoric of republican rejuvenation had to be enunciated with great delicacy.

Thus Bérenger’s propaganda campaign was crucial. It attempted

⁶⁷ *L’action*, Nov. 11, 1909.

⁶⁸ *L’action*, Nov. 12, 1909.

⁶⁹ *L’action*, Jan. 1, 1910.

⁷⁰ AN 424 AP (papiers Paul-Boncour), vol. 8, has many reports on the “Parti républicain socialiste,” which held its first congress in Feb. 1914.

to provide the intellectual coherence for a republican, anticlerical majority that would follow Briand. For many republicans, however, the ultimate question in politics was the extremely mundane issue of where in the Chamber one would draw the line between reaction and revolution, between right and left—and how much of the gray area in between would have to be covered by a government program for a workable majority to be built in support of it. There could thus be a dangerous dislocation between rhetoric designed to shore up the government's support in the intellectual reform constituency—that is, outside the Chamber—and the rhetoric as heard by Radicals inside the Chamber. When Briand called for electoral reform, was he trying to build a new forward-thinking party of the Left out of the stagnating Radical and independent socialist groups, or did he seek a broader coalition that included conniving clericalists? Read outside Parliament, the speeches were interpreted in the former, positive manner; inside, they were seen as a nefarious attempt to woo conservatives. Playing to the gallery of wider opinion, Briand appeared sincere, but he neglected the pettifogging Radical deputies at his peril.

When Briand delivered his next major speech, at Saint-Chamond during the election campaign of April 1910, some commentators were more skeptical about the government's ability to bring about change. Many, however, remained enthusiastic. Perhaps this was because of the magnetic aura that Briand projected not only in his speeches but also in the glowing reports published by most of the republican press. In any case, the pressure for reform and the proposals the government put forward in its declaration of June 1910 can be fully understood only if we accept that there was a strong body of intellectual opinion behind them.

How broad Briand's coalition had to be hinged on how well the Radical Party did in the 1910 elections. If it won a great preponderance of seats, the government would be able to bring many undecided Radicals behind its new agenda. If it did less well, the need to broaden the basis of the government's majority might lead, if not to the courting of the Right by Briand, then at least to a sense among some Radicals that he was building an unholy alliance of Socialists and *progressistes*. Those accusations were indeed made; but the election campaign itself was fought with the Radical Party following a line sympathetic to that laid out by Briand at Saint-Chamond.⁷¹ This was in part thanks to the efforts of Léon Bourgeois and Ferdinand Buisson at the Radical Party

⁷¹ Bérenger described the Radical manifesto as a natural complement to the Saint-Chamond speech: *L'action*, Apr. 13, 1910.

congress, the former seeing in Briand's overtures the natural extension of his own philosophy of "solidarité."⁷²

Meanwhile, Bérenger kept up the press campaign for appeasement. According to him, Briand's government should institute both electoral and administrative reform simultaneously. They were the prerequisites for any republican rejuvenation, since as long as the Chamber was in thrall to arrondissement election committees, no generous overhaul of the system could be expected. During the latter stages of the 1910 election campaign, and in the period after the elections while the government was drawing up its new program, Bérenger wrote a stream of articles on the issues of electoral reform and administrative reform in particular. Social reforms such as the introduction of an income tax and the development of the legal status of unions were, he argued, contingent on state reform.⁷³ It was clear that even the initial reforms were far from simple, however. At the Radical congress, Bérenger had spoken in favor of an electoral regime based on the *scrutin de liste régional* (regional party list), and he admitted that it would be illogical to make such changes without establishing the regions. These had a shadowy economic and industrial existence already, he argued, but this needed to be consolidated.⁷⁴ For Bérenger, regionalism was a long-ripening fruit now necessary for the growth of the republic.⁷⁵

The intellectual campaign impinged on politics through the manifestoes of the candidates: the regionalists constantly cited the 412 deputies who had put administrative reform on their manifestos. The regionalist leader Charles-Brun's scrapbook of articles covering the spring 1910 debate shows just how caught up the press was with the issue. Regional reform was eclipsed only by electoral reform as a topic of debate.⁷⁶ Within the Radical mainstream, for every Camille Pelletan who opposed regional reform, there was a Charles Beauquier who demonstrated that the regional reform they conceived was eminently "Radical": it adapted the one and indivisible republic to its modern economic concerns.

As the project's complexity became more widely understood, however, the regionalists, realizing that it probably would not be presented to Parliament, reverted to their more cautious position. They wanted to

⁷² See Jack Hayward, "Solidarity: The Social History of an Idea in Nineteenth-Century France," *International Review of Social History* 4 (1959): 261–84.

⁷³ *L'action*, May 10, 1910.

⁷⁴ Articles by Bérenger in *L'action*, May 13–16, 1910.

⁷⁵ *L'action*, May 14, 1910.

⁷⁶ Scrapbook in the Archives Charles-Brun, Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, Paris, box 18.

avoid a repeat of the top-down administrative reforms of the Constituent Assembly and to follow the “realist” way of reform, that is, reform slowly, with both ears tuned to the voice of public opinion, and thus make the reforms organic rather than abstract. “We can’t do it on the hoof, in a fit of typical French enthusiasm,” wrote one of Bérénger’s collaborators at *L’action*; “we have to elaborate it with care and over time. The efforts of a whole legislature [four years] would not be too long.”⁷⁷ Moreover, a consensus seemed to be developing among all but the fully paid-up members of the FRF that electoral reform ought to be introduced before administrative reform, not least because the Chamber as a whole had more expertise on that question and would more easily formulate a coherent response. There was talk of a regional decentralization, using thirty-six regions: but the government made no specific declaration to this effect, and the regionalists themselves were wary about seeing such a reform introduced without a lengthy period of consultation and study.⁷⁸

The question of electoral reform, however, definitely attracted the new Chamber’s attention. By the end of May, Bérénger had thrown down his own gauntlet: electoral reform would be brought before the Chamber at once, whisked through a commission, and voted by the end of the year; the Senate should finish its overlong deliberation on the income tax; and a measure granting greater statutory rights to *fonctionnaires* should be passed as well.⁷⁹ He had clearly been in close touch with the inner circle of the cabinet, since he correctly foretold that the government’s electoral reform project would include a six-year mandate for deputies and the renewal of the Chamber by thirds.

The government program was brought to the Chamber by Briand on June 9. Bérénger grew exasperated as the debate was clogged up by interminable interpellations, many of which seemed to have little bearing on the details of the program. The main groups in the Chamber used the debate on the government’s declaration as an excuse to establish their own identities, and their own position within Parliament. The *socialistes unifiés*, for example, presented new young deputies as their champions, including Albert Thomas, later known for his labor organizing during the First World War. The Socialists’ speeches were often general statements of Marxist dogma, advanced without any real attention to the precise issues raised by Briand. More generally, deputies on the center-left sounded the clarion calls of the republic: *laïcité* (the

⁷⁷ Aulard, in *L’action*, May 26, 1910.

⁷⁸ See Charles-Brun, in *Le mémorial artésien*, May 26, 1910.

⁷⁹ *L’action*, May 27, 1910.

doctrine of the secular state), republican defense, and the defense of universal suffrage were constantly trumpeted from the tribune. Oratory seemed to be at a greater premium than constructive reform.

We must examine this debate in some detail to correct the false impression that Briand's program was a dangerously moderate platform that sought to undermine the republican advance of the previous ten years. It has been suggested that only the Right gave unequivocal support to Briand's declaration and that the debate was thus a struggle between republican vacillation and republican defense.⁸⁰ Others have tied this analysis to the developing crisis of national security and the rise of nationalism, suggesting that Briand was but a staging post on the way to the conservative Raymond Poincaré and his "nationalist" victory in the presidential elections of 1913.⁸¹ Briand and Poincaré may have shared an interest in state reform, but the argument for such a program could draw its strength as well from syndicalist or independent socialist sources as it could from the Right. The obsession with placing projects and politicians on a sliding scale from left to right has clouded the real nature of the political debate at this crucial period of the Third Republic.

We should reiterate the distinction between the political rhetoric Briand used in the Chamber to establish his majority and the language he used before the country as a whole at Neubourg, Périgueux, or Saint-Chamond. Remarks to this wider audience did not need to be as precise: they were designed to develop a public debate, not merely to devise a parliamentary agenda. A declaration in the Chamber entailed more specific rhetorical gestures, since, from the *socialistes unifiés* to the nationalists, a great variety of political languages were spoken, each with its own key reference points. So it was relatively easy for Briand to speak to the country as a whole at Saint-Chamond about his plan for republican rejuvenation based on state reform leading to social reform. In Parliament, however, each element of the program would elicit praise or derision from different sections of the hemicycle. Regional reform, for example, had become a commonsense measure for many republicans, but in Parliament such commonplaces became bones of contention. A regionalist proposal advanced by a man of the Left could be cynically approved by the Right if the latter suspected that other elements of the Left would react against it and provoke the collapse of the government. If such a measure were couched in terms of the defense of the lay republic and subordinated to further measures protecting

⁸⁰ Maurice Bourjol, *Les institutions régionales de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris, 1969), 151n2.

⁸¹ Most notably Sumler, "Domestic Influences."

schools from a Catholic resurgence, the Jacobins in the Radical Party might in turn have come to support it (as of course Bérénger had done).

In his June 9 speech to the Chamber, Briand erred by using rhetorical devices appropriate to the wider debate in a context that called for a subtler approach. After all, the first necessity was political: the government needed to establish its majority, particularly after elections whose results were at best confusing, for all that they reconfirmed the republican victory. A more straightforward program of republican defense, which would unite the Radicals and Radical Socialists, would not have responded to the great pressure in the country for republican rejuvenation. Thus Briand adopted a rather dangerous tactic. He advanced his program using the rhetoric of rejuvenation rather than that of republican defense. This at once raised the hackles of many Radicals, who were angered by the applause generated on center-right benches.

Briand did call for a republican majority, however.⁸² Notwithstanding the outrage expressed by some Radicals and *socialistes unifiés*, he clearly stated that his government would seek to preserve the achievements of the republic, notably its “conquêtes laïques” (secular victories), and he insisted that the lay education system was nothing less than the cornerstone of the republic. It was the earlier part of his speech that caused the most problems. He had begun by reflecting that the forces of reaction had been neutralized and that republicans had to respond to the call for reform. The question hinged on whether they would accept that the old battle against clericalism was indeed won. Turning first to the Far Left, Briand called for a halt to the practice of one-upmanship, which so often plagued the closing weeks of a legislature. The country demanded social reform and would no longer tolerate tactics that prevented it. He demanded a more responsible attitude to the process of legislation. This angered the Far Left, but the Radical Socialists were now on their guard as well. The next stage of Briand’s presentation left them cold. Total silence fell on their benches as Briand insisted that a government’s first duty was to establish liberty and justice for all citizens, regardless of the political passions of the hour. This was read, correctly, as a call for “appeasement”—which the Radicals understood as religious appeasement, not merely appeasement of the social unrest that had spread under Clemenceau.

As Briand outlined his plan for electoral reform, he touched on the defense of universal suffrage, a rallying cry for all Radicals. But many had not heard the rumors about the six-year mandate proposal: “mouve-

⁸² Speech reported in *Le matin*, among other newspapers, June 10, 1910. The citations from the declaration and the reactions of other deputies that follow are from this source.

ments divers” were noted throughout the Chamber. When Briand turned to administrative reform, making it the corollary of electoral reform, these movements developed. Given the background to this declaration, it may be surprising that many deputies continued to associate regional decentralization with reaction. Nevertheless they did, and in spite of the most “modern” spin Briand could muster (“It is possible to superimpose a regional organization over departmental organization, by grouping departments on the basis of affinity of interests, notably in the economic domain”), the official reports recorded one legislator’s remark, “My word, he is becoming *royaliste!*,” as a testimony to the reaction of many in the Chamber. Briand’s elucidation of the need to improve the administration, develop the country’s infrastructure, and introduce a legal statute for civil servants again met with silence among the Radical Socialists. A lengthy exposition of his ideas for social reform revived some of their interest. He called for the extension of greater rights to unions, the establishment of workers’ credit, the setting up of a system whereby workers could benefit more from the profits of industry, and, in rural areas, the introduction of a right to property for peasants. He spoke of economic emancipation as naturally following the political freedom the republic had achieved at its outset.

The reaction to Briand’s speech showed that he had taken a dangerous tack. As a speech to be read in the newspapers, by the public at large, his presentation could not have been faulted. He had brought peace after the battles of the past and established a range of new projects for the social republic of the future. In the Chamber, however, reaction varied widely. Pelletan, perhaps predictably, proclaimed, “Not for years has any government given such a boost to the Right!” Jaurès understood it a little better, but even he foresaw danger for Briand. “Never,” he insisted, “for all that I am a *proportionnaliste*, would I have dared criticize the regime and its habits in this way.” The newspapers cited many Radicals and Radical Socialists who approved of the declaration. *Le radical* hinted that the problems were issues of minor detail, not of doctrine: Briand was overly keen on military expenditure; he had not sufficiently developed the defense of the secular education system; and he had not addressed the question of state monopolies.⁸³

The Radical Socialist deputy Louis Malvy expressed the problem with the declaration most clearly.⁸⁴ It was a question not of what had gone into the speech but of the tone Briand had adopted and the order

⁸³ *Le radical*, June 10, 1910.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* Malvy, a minister during the First World War, was implicated in the scandal involving Caillaux’s private attempts to bring about peace.

in which he had made his points. Malvy had wanted to see income tax reform and the defense of secular education at the top of the agenda. By beginning with state reform, moving on to social reform, and only touching on issues of republican defense, Briand had given the Chamber the impression that he was courting the Center and the Right. Thus the tidal wave of interpellations that prolonged the debate until the end of June had a purpose beyond the oratorical vanity of parliamentarians. It was important to the Radicals that Briand's rhetorical emphasis be altered, and thus they constantly sought "clarification" by asking where on the axis of political allegiance the government proposed to find its center of gravity.

If the split between Jacobins such as Pelletan and state reformers such as Briand was the most obvious, another division was even more important in the long run. The problem of the income tax lurked behind the scenes in Radical Socialist quarters. The brilliant but flawed Caillaux, who had become an alternative figurehead for Radical Socialism, had made the campaign for a modern income tax his own, and there was already a frisson of tension between Christ and Napoléon, as Clemenceau had described Briand and Caillaux.⁸⁵ Indeed, it can be argued that Briand had ignored the income tax merely to snub Caillaux.⁸⁶ When the Briand experiment ended in early 1911, it was Caillaux who emerged as the alternative leader of the Left (although the willfulness of his foreign negotiations eventually compromised him).

This helps explain the muted reaction from the political group closest in theory to Briand, the independent socialists, and behind them intellectuals such as Parsons and Antonelli. As they met to discuss their own response to the declaration, they expressed considerable reservation about the whole program. Paul-Boncour argued that the government could have built a far stronger majority on the left if it had elaborated more on social-economic reforms.⁸⁷ State monopolies should have been developed; they were a feature of the Radical Party program and could have provided a new point of union between Radicals and Socialists. This gives a clear hint that some of the reform constituency believed it unnecessary to seek a wider coalition, and that the forward-looking reform agenda would best be served by concentrating more heavily on social reform. Paul-Boncour never worked for Briand,

⁸⁵ Quoted in Rudolph Binion, *Defeated Leaders: The Political Fate of Caillaux, Jouvenel, and Tardieu* (New York, 1960), 29.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁷ *Le radical*, June 17, 1910.

but the following spring he entered the cabinet of Ernest Monis, which was largely animated by Caillaux.

Le radical's editorial the day after the debate had begun answered some of the criticisms. The editorialist seemed to understand that Briand was using the Chamber to address the country as a whole.⁸⁸ This of course was both the strength and the weakness of the declaration. But this important organ of the center-left press believed that Briand's remark about the secular education system proved his trustworthiness. He had offered measures that were not just republican but social democratic, and thus in tune with the needs of the nation.⁸⁹ *La lanterne* reiterated this interpretation, insisting that Briand was not talking to the Right but rather was inviting the Left to work with him and move on from past battles.⁹⁰

Eventually, Briand gave the Chamber the assurances it had demanded. The government wanted to follow a program that would rise above party politics, he said, but it would resign if its majority ever depended on the Right. The speech with which Briand closed the debate won over many republican groups in the Chamber, the press, and the country as a whole—not to mention foreign newspapers that, particularly on the other side of the Channel, had good reason to observe the progress of reform in France.⁹¹ The general impression was that Briand could count on a majority made up of Radicals and Radical Socialists, without having to rely on the Center-Right. He appealed once more to the Chamber's sense of national duty, promising that the government would govern with a republican majority, but for the country as a whole.⁹²

Many of Briand's doubters had in fact been members of the reform constituency who were suspicious of his beautiful speeches, which seemed to capture so easily the mood of the hour; but it was not Briand who had frustrated their call for "action, not words" so much as the endless interpellations from deputies seeking, in lengthy flights of oratory, clarification on subtle points of interpretation.⁹³ At the beginning of July, in the last days before the summer recess, the government tried to galvanize the enthusiasm of the reform constituency once more, with

⁸⁸ *Le radical*, June 11, 1910.

⁸⁹ Paul Bourély, in *Le radical*, June 11, 1910.

⁹⁰ *La lanterne*, editorial, June 11, 1910.

⁹¹ See the citations in Suarez, *Briand*, 2:269.

⁹² See, e.g., reports in *L'action*, July 28, 1910.

⁹³ Henry Béranger complained forcefully of the lengthiness of the debate in *L'action*, July 20, 1910.

the deposition of three major laws: the project on electoral reform, as promised in the declaration; the long-awaited civil servants bill; and a reform of the judiciary that was announced by Briand's justice minister, the moderate Louis Barthou.⁹⁴ Administrative reform would have to wait until the autumn. A circular to prefects asking for their views on regional reform was sent out in September; what came of it amid the chaos that followed in October is impossible to trace in detail.⁹⁵ It is by no means clear that any concrete proposal on administrative reform would have passed in the Chamber, even if the three major reforms put forth in July had been accomplished.

The mood in July 1910 was, however, tremendously favorable to Briand. He was applauded across Europe as a true statesman. Encomiums came from unlikely quarters. Joseph Reinach thought Briand's summing-up speech the best thing he had heard since Gambetta. He pointed out to Briand that much of the old opportunist approach was germane to Briand's own desire to institute slow, peaceful change.⁹⁶ The connection between a politician now on the center-right, Reinach, and a socially reformist government illustrates how broadly the concern for republican rejuvenation resonated with politicians of all parties, and it demonstrates once more the inadequacy of the bipolar model as a defining concept in the politics of the Third Republic.

The most important of the compliments paid to Briand was, however, a letter from Millerand, holidaying in Carlsbad at the end of July. Millerand, himself a strong personality, had infuriated his fellow Socialists by entering the government of Waldeck-Rousseau. As Socialist turncoats, he and Briand, who had been colleagues at *La lanterne* in the mid-1890s, shared a common position in politics: despite the strength of their personalities, they lacked a real power base in the Chamber. In view of later developments, the following letter from Millerand to Briand is striking:

My dear friend,

It is now a year since you formed the ministry, and I did not want to let this anniversary pass without sending you, from abroad, my affectionate remembrances and my friendly gratitude for having associated me with the major project you have established and pursued with so much talent, courage, and success.

Difficulties you have not lacked, and they will continue. But

⁹⁴ See *L'action*, July 1, 1910.

⁹⁵ See Bourjol, *Institutions régionales*, 152.

⁹⁶ Briand papers, vol. 27: several letters from Reinach, undated but clearly from the period Oct. 1909–Oct. 1910, offer encouragement and praise for recent speeches. The connection was further developed by Georges Béret in *De Gambetta à Briand*.

your very persistence in the post is a precious boost to your attempts to overcome them. Even here I have heard fellow countrymen who are far from sharing our ideas enthusiastically praising you, and you can imagine with what pleasure and pride I have received their plaudits.

You have renewed the politics of our country, which the regime badly needed. Your task is only just beginning as you attempt to realize all the hopes to which that renewal has given rise; you have only, if you will allow me to reiterate what I have sometimes told you in person, to have confidence in yourself. Your strength is greater than you imagine: take heart from that.

For myself, I am proud to have been able, thanks to you, to collaborate in such a noble and necessary enterprise.⁹⁷

The events of the autumn of 1910 have obscured the fundamental sympathy between Millerand and Briand, founded on the hope that the latter had instilled in the country. The notion that Briand's own personality was holding him back seems strange, but perhaps he did have less confidence in himself than his presentation at the tribune of the Chamber suggested. When we consider that never again, in any of his numerous governments, did Briand announce such a broad package of domestic reforms, with such a powerful political statement of the art of governing and the duty of a legislature and a cabinet to the country at large, we see that there may indeed be something vital to be drawn from Millerand's letter. Briand's own character is an important consideration as we turn to the end of his appeasement experiment.

The failure of Briand's program stems largely from the events of October 1910, when a railway strike broke out and Briand was forced to adopt strong tactics to restore order. Unlike the debate from the May elections to the summer recess, these events have been well covered by biographers and historians and must be passed over more rapidly here. We need to begin, however, by revisiting the political debate within the Radical Party, which had not been fully pacified by the end of June 1910 and which provided a context for the autumn crisis.

During the parliamentary recess, Bérenger renewed the propaganda campaign for Briand's program in a long series of articles in which he attacked the Jacobin wing of the Radical Party.⁹⁸ Although most Radicals in the Chamber had been won over, Emile Combes, the former prime minister who was now using his position in the Senate to criticize government vacillation over the issue of republican defense,

⁹⁷ Briand papers, vol. 26, dated July 25, 1910.

⁹⁸ Articles in *L'action*, Aug. 6–25, 1910.

had not been party to those discussions. He rightly saw that Briand's reform movement was grounded in a rejection of the narrowly anti-clerical policy he had himself pursued when head of the government between 1902 and 1905. He issued a denunciation of Briand, timed just after Parliament had been dismissed for the summer. Bérenger took up the argument for the reformers. Combes, he insisted, had never even had a program of social reform and was therefore in no position to accuse Briand of using his as a shield for right-wingers. There was a problem, Bérenger was forced to admit: *apaisement*, the term that Briand had used from early 1909 to distinguish his social and state reforms, was still causing confusion. Combes could use it to suggest that Briand was more concerned with appeasing the clerical Right, yet that had never been Briand's understanding, nor was it supported by Bérenger, *La démocratie sociale*, or the Radicals and Socialists closest to Briand.⁹⁹ Bérenger admitted that the government had been applauded by some on the right, but he blamed Radicals such as Combes. If they had come on board unequivocally, the problem would never have arisen and the government could have established its program more efficiently.¹⁰⁰

As it was, the summer recess was looking increasingly dangerous for the government and its plans. The railway workers had been threatening to strike since the spring, and although Millerand had steered other workers away from such measures, he could not prevent the *cheminots* from walking off the job at the end of September. The outbreak came hard on the heels of the death of Briand's mother, for whom the prime minister was still in mourning. Although he gave no sign of it in political debate, Briand was shattered, and his concentration on political issues must have suffered. He decided to break the strike by conscripting the railway workers into the army, thus obliging them to keep working. Although a wide body of opinion praised him for his courageous action, his own cabinet was split. The two most senior left-wingers in the government were René Viviani, who had strong links to working-class movements, having been the first minister of labor under Clemenceau, and Millerand. The latter was extremely anxious about the consequences of Briand's action, while the former was simply furious.¹⁰¹

The Chamber reconvened in an atmosphere of great tension, with the government already on shaky ground. As he sought to reassert his authority, Briand gave a remarkable speech in which he declared ille-

⁹⁹ *L'action*, Aug. 13, 1910.

¹⁰⁰ *L'action*, Aug. 12, 1910.

¹⁰¹ Suarez, *Briand*, 2:278-79; on Barthou's reaction, see R. J. Young, *Power and Pleasure: Louis Barthou and the Third French Republic* (Montreal, 1991), 94.

gality an option, albeit a last resort, for a government determined to protect the national interest. This statement divided opinion even more sharply. The slippage between the speech's reception in the Chamber and in the newspapers the next morning was even greater than before.¹⁰² As he had done in June, Briand seduced the intellectuals and the reporters, but in the end it was the fire and brimstone called down by Socialist and Radical Socialist deputies that doomed the government. Without the support of Viviani and Millerand, the whole point of Briand's *apaisement* was lost; it had always depended on a coalition of moderates and independent socialists, with backing from the intellectual Radical Socialists we have examined here. The atmosphere of hope and trust that Briand had instilled in the Chamber, and that had been strong enough to survive the debate of June 1910, had been shattered by the end of October.

Briand's personal reaction to this turn of events is difficult to fathom. His remark about illegality was politically reckless: no amount of spin in center-left newspapers would help him strengthen his majority for the reform agenda. Why, having seen Viviani's earlier reaction to his strikebreaking tactics, did Briand not attempt to beguile the Left and calm the atmosphere in the Chamber? He evidently did not think the reaction of the Far Left worth the trouble. One of Briand's biographers pointed to a classic incident: a hard-line Socialist was heaping invective on him, and Briand could be seen uncharacteristically making copious notes—it was widely assumed that he was outlining the brilliant retort he duly delivered. In fact, Briand was writing to his lover Berthe Cerny, begging forgiveness for his distraction in the current political climate.¹⁰³ His blithe attitude, admirable to some, was ultimately a weakness. If he had genuinely believed in the great program he announced in June, his approach to building the political consensus necessary to see it through was lackadaisical. When he resigned to form a new cabinet, Briand seemed to have forgotten the whole *apaisement* campaign. His second cabinet was dominated by men for whom republican defense was the first imperative: compared to the agenda of June 1910, the new government's program was very narrow. The principle of arbitration in labor disputes remained central (of necessity), but Briand's campaign for wide-reaching state reforms was over.

The two themes of the reform constituency were once more di-

¹⁰² See letters from Henry Bernstein, Oct. 21, 1910 (Briand papers, vol. 21), and Ferdinand, King of Bulgaria, who visited the Chamber during this debate, Nov. 1, 1910 (Briand papers, vol. 25). On Bernstein and Briand, see Suarez, *Briand*, 2:280–81.

¹⁰³ Saint-Georges de Bouhélier, *Un grand amour de Briand* (Geneva, 1949), 308.

vided. The hope for state reform now lay with the moderate Poincaré, who would emerge as a leading force in 1912; at the same time, social reform was pushed forward by Caillaux. This new political arrangement allowed the mass of republicans to make a clearer choice. Poincaré drew support from some on the left, such as Briand himself, while others found the clearly Radical Socialist agenda of Caillaux much more uncompromising than that of Briand. The new alignment in fact predates the argument over the three-year military conscription law, which many have seen as the principal dividing line in the prewar Chamber. The political disputes of 1913–14 were prepared by the fallout from Briand's *apaisement* experiment.

That the reform constituency had divided into two camps, one maintaining pressure for electoral or administrative reform, the other focusing on social issues, was made clear by the problems experienced by the groups of young intellectuals that had coalesced around Briand in 1909–10. The Comité de la Démocratie Sociale was confronted with a grave choice: either refuse any cooperation with social Catholicism, or continue on the path of appeasement by building bridges across the old divide between clerical Right and anticlerical Left.¹⁰⁴ The Catholic republican movement muddied the waters. Marc Sangnier, founder of the social Catholic organization Le Sillon, had thrown down the gauntlet to left-wing intellectuals, demanding the foundation of a new party that would unite all who sought the rejuvenation of the republic. Because of the interventions of Radicals such as Combes and Pelletan, this challenge was issued too late. Antonelli and Parsons were uncertain how to proceed and found the decision taken out of their hands by the intransigent anticlericalism of the “Jeunes radicaux,” led by Paul Hyacinthe Loyson.¹⁰⁵ The young reformers convened a congress with the aim of harmonizing their antistatist programs. Regional decentralization was a central part of the agenda, with *La démocratie sociale*, Le Sillon, and a group known as the “Jeunesse républicaine patriote” all subscribing to the basic principles of regionalism. Yet even here it was obvious that union in the republican youth movements was impossible.¹⁰⁶ The reform constituency was impossibly divided.

Older Radicals, notably Combes and Clemenceau, continued to prevent progress, hampering Poincaré's state reform projects in the Senate. Thus France's reform constituency was divided at its base and

¹⁰⁴ Gérard Baal, “Les jeunes radicaux (1910–1914),” in *Hommage à Madeleine Rebérioux: Avenirs et avant-gardes en France, XIXe–XXe siècle*, ed. V. Duclert (Paris, 1999), 332.

¹⁰⁵ Baal, “Jeunes radicaux,” 334.

¹⁰⁶ The Congrès Républicain de la Jeunesse of June 6–7, 1911, was reported in the *Revue politique et parlementaire* of Aug. 1911.

frustrated at its apex. Intellectuals would continue to criticize the unreformed state, as Robert de Jouvenel's *La république des camarades* showed. The FRF and other pressure groups continued their propaganda, and much cross-fertilization went on between the different movements for state reform. For example, Antonelli, who was Charles-Brun's principal interlocutor at a special session of the eminent Société d'Economie Sociale, asked the regionalist leader whether he could see regionalism as part of a wider program of social and state reforms.¹⁰⁷ In the longer term, state reform remained essential to many who wanted to rejuvenate the republic, whether they were building programs of post-war reconstruction or attempting to revive republican institutions in the crisis of the mid-1930s. But the Jacobins of the Radical Party stymied progress at the one time, in 1910, when pressures were less and when success might have been possible.

Although some social reformers had implicitly rejected Briand as a progenitor of reform, many aspects of his style remained. Paul-Boncour, for example, declared that he had but one aim as minister of labor: to apply the pensions law by July 3, 1911.¹⁰⁸ The concern with making politics more practical was essential. As with Briand's attack on the "mares stagnantes," what was at issue was the nature of Parliament. Rejuvenation of the republic would only come if politicians concentrated on thorny issues of economic and social reality. This concentration on a "politique réaliste," and the establishment of a social reform agenda within republicanism, had emerged in Briand's moment of hope and would be perhaps its most important legacy.

Thus the strange moment of hope that presented itself to France in 1910 is central to the history of the Third Republic. In the current atmosphere of French historical and political studies, realism and the reaction against a priori principles are all too easily associated with the "New Right." This is because Maurras and others sometimes used terms such as *realism* and *organicism* to underscore their own political projects. Discovering such terms in the manifestos of independent socialists can thus be surprising. The issue of Briand's personality is important as well. Put off perhaps by the epithets applied to Briand later in life—Briand the lazy man, too idle to develop a sustained program that followed socialist principles—scholars of early-twentieth-century politics have all too often ignored the presence behind Briand of a coherent body of intellectual opinion. Marie-Georges Dèzes put her finger precisely on the nature of this opinion in her contribution to a special

¹⁰⁷ The meeting was held on Jan. 8, 1912, and reported in the *Réforme sociale* of Mar. 1912.

¹⁰⁸ Henri de Jouvenel, preface to Le Blond, *Idées de Paul-Boncour*, 9.

issue of the journal *Mouvement social* on reformism. Briand's project was placed "under the patronage of those who . . . refused the millennialist irrationalism of ideology, and described a government of opinion as that which reestablished social balance through a progressive program of daily action."¹⁰⁹ Above all, then the "politique réaliste" of Briand implied reforming slowly, day by day, in consultation with public opinion. Intellectual groups such as Benoist's proportional representation activists or Charles-Brun's regionalist movement thus had a double role to play. By building grassroots support through propaganda, they would create the conditions for reform to be politically realizable; by continuing to promote state reform in more intellectual circles, they persuaded opinion makers that state reform was a tangible problem, involving real social issues. The haste demanded by Bérenger in the summer of 1910 was not the best way to proceed: a longer campaign was needed, involving the education of public opinion as well as the adoption of reform packages.

In the short term, this meant that reform was often frustrated. The essential point, however, is that writers such as Antonelli and Paul-Boncour struggled to make politics dependent on normative political problems rather than on a priori questions. Perhaps they were ahead of their time. Briand embodied the philosophy of steady change to the extent that, when compared with the vocal dogmatists of the Radical and Socialist parties, he appeared to be a vacillator, an "endormeur." Yet the "normalization" of politics had a clear intellectual coherence, and the ongoing struggles of politicians such as Briand, Viviani, and Poincaré to respond to the proposals thrown up by the intellectual reform constituency show that the Third Republic was not a dead-end régime but one where arguments over principle were slowly and uncertainly giving way to arguments over "progrès quotidien," the politics of daily reform.

At the heart of political debate was an increasing focus on realism and pragmatism. From the crisis of the 1930s until the later years of the twentieth century, *pragmatism* was a dirty word, associated with collaboration and an erosion of those principles on which liberation depended. Yet when a Lionel Jospin proposes, within the constitution, a special status for Corsica, or a Jean-Pierre Raffarin institutes the idea of "experimental lawmaking," allowing state reform to be introduced at speeds that vary according to the needs of different regions, it is clear that realism is once more defining French political debate, cutting across the old party lines and perhaps fulfilling some of the

¹⁰⁹ Dèzes, "Participation et démocratie sociale," 117.

hopes raised by the state reformers and social reformers of the belle époque. Understanding the reform debate of 1900–1910 is clearly relevant to current ideas about decentralization and constitutional change. Briand's moment of hope may in the short run have been a false dawn, but in looking at the intellectual and political context of that moment, we have seen that the realist approach to politics was central to mainstream republican thinking. That is why the more pragmatic but less doctrinaire programs of reform continue to bring a note of optimism into French politics. Whether Raffarin's realism can successfully answer the great questions that arose out of the presidential elections of April 2002 remains to be seen, especially after the Right's humiliation in the regional elections of April 2004. Nevertheless, this article has suggested that the historical references for such an understanding are fruitful and abundant.