

PARENTS' ASSOCIATIONS IN FRANCE: THEIR GROWTH AND CHARACTER UP TO 1968

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This paper describes the development up to 1968 of the centralized parents' associations which, after 1968, were formally involved in the management of schools in France. After a brief discussion of the associations' differing attitudes to secularism, their evolution as pressure-groups is sketched in, and it is shown how by the late sixties they constituted an obvious tool which lay to the hand of the government after the 1968 upheaval. The attitudes of their mass membership lead the foreign observer to a certain scepticism about the continued centrality of secularism as an educational issue in France.

Within the last decade, several countries in Western Europe have moved decisively towards the formal involvement of parents in the management and government of schools. That societies of widely differing traditions in administration, politics and culture should be experimenting with broadly similar devices to encourage consultation and participation suggests that a major shift is occurring in people's attitudes to schools and to how those schools relate to society.

In spite of the intrinsic interest of this topic, it has so far attracted little academic attention. The reasons are not hard to find. The laws and regulations governing parental participation are not only complex and tedious, they display to an even greater degree than most administrative arrangements the yawning gap between aspiration and reality. As participation is normally actualized through a variety of pressure groups, the researcher has to rely for his data on personal contact and ephemeral periodical literature. Furthermore, parent groups tend to thrive on value-conflict and one-sided controversy. It is not therefore surprising that the serious researcher moves hastily on to more manageable topics.

Yet the very awkwardness of parent groups, their refusal to fit in with the bureaucracy, their repeated reminders that the emperor is naked — all these things give them a particular value as indicators of what is really

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happening. To look at their activities in detail is also to be reminded of the confused and haphazard nature of so much educational change, a truth not always apparent in the educational expert's view of education. 'The social scientist is always inclined to invest the organisms he studies with more rationality than they display in practice, this attitude probably stems from the difficulty of reconstructing behaviours unless one attributes to them in advance a tendency towards calculation and considered thought (9)'. More particularly, a study of parent groups in France tells us something about the nature of decision-making in a centralized bureaucracy, as well as something about the 'Frenchness' of French attitudes to education. An *association de parents d'élèves* is a very different animal from an Anglo-Saxon parents' association.

PARENTS' ASSOCIATIONS IN FRANCE

So our first question is deceptively simple. What is a parents' association? In one sense, it is in France exactly what it is elsewhere in the world: a voluntary association of the parents of children attending a particular school. A ministerial circular of 1 March 1962 lays down the requirements for such an association to be officially approved (*habilitée*) and makes it clear that the Ministry does not favour any blurring of the line between professional educators and parents, it is desirable that teachers should attend meetings by invitation, as observers, but not as members. However, in practice, associations of the purely local type described in the 1962 circular rarely or never exist. When the French talk about parents' associations, they mean five national federations, or their local manifestations. These are normally referred to either by lengthy acronyms of bewildering similarity, or by the names of their current presidents. Thus since its foundation in 1968, the Union Nationale des Associations des Parents d'Elèves de l'Enseignement Libre (UNAAPE) has already been known as the *Fédération Hennequet*, the *Fédération Lottmann*, and the *Fédération Gousseau*, it will be clear that the possibilities for confusion are endless. In order to simplify this exposition, I have therefore decided to give these organizations conventional English labels. In order of foundation, the parents' federations are (i) *Fédération des Parents d'Elèves de l'Enseignement Public (PEEP)* (Moderate-Right Federation), founded in 1910, (ii) *Fédération Nationale des Associations de Parents d'Elèves de l'Enseignement Public (Enseignement Général, Technique et Professionnel (FNAPEEP)* (Technical Federation), founded in 1932, (iii) *Union Nationale des Associations de Parents d'Elèves de l'Enseignement Libre (UNAPEL)* (Catholic Federation), founded in 1932, (iv) *Fédération des Conseils*

de Parents d'Elèves des Ecoles Publiques (FCPE) (Left-wing Federation), founded in 1948, and (v) Union Nationale des Associations Autonomes des Parents d'Elèves (UNAAPE) (Right-wing Federation), founded in 1968. The Catholic Federation enjoys a monopoly position in Catholic schools, the other four federations compete for membership among parents of children in the state sector.

Two words of warning are necessary before embarking upon a description of the growth and character of the federations. The first is that (as I shall attempt to explain) the labels I have invented must not deceive the non-French reader into assuming too great a degree of ideological homogeneity among the membership. The second is that the five federations are by no means the only voluntary organizations for parents (and others) interested in education. There exists a multiplicity of pressure groups and associations of all kinds, as becomes clear in any educational controversy in France.* This paper is restricted to those mass all-purpose parents' associations which are officially recognized by the Ministry of Education as representing parents' interests. (The Association de Parents d'Enfants Inadaptés, although it shares some of the characteristics of the federations described here, is not included.) It should, however, always be borne in mind that the federations operate against a background of fairly generalized pressure-group activity and that at least some of their activists (*militants*) will also be members of other overlapping groupings of a more specialized character.

The differences between the federations are often difficult enough for French people to grasp. They are more easily understood if one has some notion of the history of parent associations in France. The first parents' associations seem to have been spontaneous local organizations of the sort described in the 1962 circular. The first recorded association was at the *Lycee Carnot* in Paris in 1905 and a number of such associations came together to form a national federation in 1910. At the time, the *lycee* was very much the school of the middle classes and, for a long time, the 'Federation of Parents' Associations for *lycees* and *colleges*' (that is, the Moderate-Right Federation) seems to have been an innocuous middle-class organization directed mainly at informing and educating parents in a mildly progressive direction (cf. 10). Gradually it began to lobby in the national

* There is no general account of these associations. Franceschi (4), describes many of those concerned with the church-state controversy. My own article on the sex education conflict attempts to show some of the variety of associations operating in a quite limited area (1).

corridors of power and, by the early 1930s, there were Federation representatives on the *Conseil Supérieur de l'Enseignement Public* (Permanent advisory councils of this sort, with large representative memberships, are a feature of French administration.)

The monopoly of the Moderate-Right Federation as the representative of secondary education was not shaken by the emergence in 1932 of the Technical Federation, the activity of which was restricted to another sector of the system. It originated as a grouping of parents' associations which emerged in the early thirties in the *école primaire supérieure* (higher elementary school). Its clientele naturally led it to an interest in technical education and it eventually conducted a successful campaign to establish a *Baccalauréat de technicien*, that is, a school-leaving certificate which would provide an *entrée* to tertiary education for those whose interests were not academic in the traditional way. Its concern for improved opportunities for working-class children gave it a rather more explicitly left-wing secularist character than the Federation serving the *lycée*, but for many years there was no direct competition. Similarly, the foundation in 1932 of the Catholic Federation had no real impact on either of the existing federations, as it catered exclusively for parents outside the state sector. It was part of the contemporary movement in the church away from its late nineteenth century clergy-dominated ghetto mentality towards a more conscious and socially responsible laity, and its foundation coincided with the papal encyclical of 1932 on *Christian Education and Youth*. When it began to emerge in 1930, it seems in fact to have been an attempt to provide some sort of moderate counterweight to the stridently right-wing *Association Catholique des Chefs de Famille* (11). It aimed partly to support and inform Catholic parents and partly to represent their views to the secular state. Until 1948 (that is, one year after the foundation of a secularist federation for primary school parents in the state sector), it was confined to secondary school parents only.

None of these pre-war federations seems to have considered that the primary sector might also benefit from organized parental support. From its 19th century origins, *le primaire* retained its working-class image, remaining for many years an all-through elementary school parallel to, but distinct from, the middle-class *lycée*, to which were attached fee-paying 'preparatory classes'. Not until 1947 did the parents of primary school children have any sort of federation comparable to the existing three. It was in that year that the Left-wing Federation was created under the aegis of the primary teachers' trade union (SNI) and the *Ligue Française de*

l'Enseignement, a well-known secularist organization founded in 1866, and grouping mainly educational associations on the left. It was devised as a means of channelling opposition to the Catholic Federation and to the church in general, which was seen by the left as having profitted illegitimately from the friendly attitude of the Vichy government. The foundation of the left-wing federation was thus part of an upsurge on the left which received its first focus in the 'States-General of Secular France' (July 1948) and went on to bitter and unsuccessful opposition to the *loi Barange* of 28th September 1951. As well as being for long a purely primary-level organization, this federation also differed from the other federations in being, until 1969, a parents' and teachers' association, its opponents claimed that it was in fact a mere front organization for left-wing teachers grouped in the *Fédération de l'Éducation Nationale* (FEN). It pursued a dynamic and expansionist policy and, in 1960, began to expand its activities to the secondary sector and thus compete directly with the Technical and Moderate-Right Federations.

The most recent of these associations, the Right-wing Federation, is the most ideologically homogeneous, springing as it does directly from the upheaval of May 1968. Its members regard themselves as dissenters from the permissive leftist orthodoxy of the Establishment represented by the two mass federations (Moderate-Right and Left-wing) — hence their title in French, the 'National Union of *Autonomous* Parents' Associations'.

THE ROLE OF SECULARISM

The attempt to distinguish between the federations throws up the whole question of *laïcité*, or secularism, for it is in terms of this classic ideological conflict that the federations tend to define themselves. What ought to be the relationship between the national state and sectional ideologies, in practice, Catholicism?

Here, clearly the Catholic Federation stands apart from the others. For it, *laïcité* tends to be equated with *neutralité*. That is, it is not, as with the left, a positive secular ethic, but a permissive framework within which *l'enseignement libre* ('free schools' to use the term which Catholics prefer, their opponents prefer the adjective 'private') can pursue its own aims. In general, the Catholic Federation is no longer the combative pressure-group it was in earlier years. Having, especially since 1958, attained most of its political aims, its interests are best served by keeping a low profile and cultivating good relationships with civil servants and politicians. In its

view, therefore, *laïcité* in the traditional sense of root-and-branch separation of church and state is no longer a live issue (cf 8)

Each of the other four federations, which are in competition for membership in the state sector, claims to be *laïque* in the historic republican sense, that is, to support the separation of church and state and the necessity to protect the national education system from undue influence from sectional interests and ideologies. Where the federations differ is in their interpretation of what *laïcité* means in practical terms. The left-wing Federation takes up an aggressively secularist attitude, its position is that the separation between church and state should be total, that no subsidies of any sort should be received by private schools, that whatever *ethic* is purveyed by the national school should be purely rationalist and equally available to all. The attitude of the Technical Federation is very similar. It attempts to draw an ideological line between itself and its left-wing competitors by stressing the need for parents' associations to be totally independent of trade-unions and political parties as well as confessional groups. The Moderate-Right Federation, while not accepting *in toto* the friendly attitude of successive Fifth Republic governments towards Catholic education, is much readier to live and let live and is generally less vociferous in its secularism. The Right-wing Federation interprets secularism largely as the avoidance of left-wing indoctrination of pupils.

To the foreign observer, *laïcité* may seem an oddly insubstantial and doctrinaire touchstone for distinguishing between parents' associations, but so much of the argument between the federations is conducted in these terms, that it will be necessary to return to this issue and ask what it really means in the second half of the 20th century.

ASSOCIATIONS IN THE 1950s AND 1960s

Even a brief account of the development of the federations makes it clear that the period just before and just after 1960 was critical. In the late 1950s, the main educational differences between the non-Catholic federations centred on the *tronc commun*, that is, the integration of the curriculum in the bottom part of the secondary sector. This was the first tentative move towards a *comprehensive* form of organization. Generally speaking, the Left-wing and Technical Federations were in favour, while the Moderate-Right's reaction veered between cautious and critical. However, these differences of opinion were probably in the long term

soluble. The real catalyst was political: the inauguration in 1958 of De Gaulle's Fifth Republic under threat of military intervention from Algiers. Educationally, the most obvious consequence of the change of *regime* was a much more favourable attitude towards Catholic schools, resulting in the *Loi Debre* of 31 December 1959, which permitted church schools to receive state subvention in return for undertaking certain contractual obligations (cf 4, 5)

The year 1959 saw a huge left-wing campaign against these measures in the course of which nearly eleven million signatures were collected in defence of the secular school. In spite of this, the government was not deflected from its intentions. It was therefore in a mood of defiance and apprehension, amid much rhetoric about democratic solidarity, that in 1960 the Left-wing Parents' Federation resolved to approach the other non-Catholic federations with a view to setting up a unified organization. When these approaches proved for the most part abortive, the critical decision was reached to extend the Left-wing Federation's activities beyond the primary sector. In the latter part of 1960, over 200 school-based secular associations were formed at the secondary level and, in February 1961, amid much talk of *la Fédération unique* (i.e. the single or comprehensive federation), the Left-wing Federation was reformed as an umbrella organization with three sections: primary, secondary and technical. Subsequently, two small specialized federations (*Fédération Motier* for secondary schools and *Fédération Brizon* for technical education) affiliated to the Left-wing Federation. The Technical Federation itself was on the verge of affiliation in the autumn of 1961, but this move seems to have foundered on personalities. Co-operation with the Moderate-Right Federation was declared impossible by the Left-wing president Jean Cornec in November 1960, this was because of their failure to oppose the *loi Debré*.

The Moderate-Right Federation responded to what it regarded as an act of trespass on its own territory by encouraging the growth of supposedly 'non-political' associations in the primary sector. It also made a strong effort to work out a viable plan for the involvement of parents in the decision-making structures of education. The project adopted by the Moderate-Right in 1962 originated in one formulated four years earlier by Jean Védrine at the independent *Centre d'études et de documentation*. In many ways, it foreshadowed the arrangements arrived at after the crises of May 1968: a network of elected councils and committees with both

consultative and decision-making functions, the latter implying considerable power * In proposing such schemes, as well as in attempting to develop closer contacts with the Ministry, the Moderate-Right Federation was clearly making an attempt at constructive collaboration with the Fifth Republic, which earned from the Left the accusation that it was the *Federation maison* (stooge federation) In 1962 it also flirted with the Technical Federation, with no more success than the Left-wing in 1961

The details of these convoluted negotiations are of little interest to any but the *aficionado* of pressure-group politics and have to be diligently sought through a miasma of congress resolutions and rhetoric, both of the Left and Right However, the context and nature of these events help to explain the general configuration of parents' associations in the state sector as it had emerged by the end of the decade two mass organizations in opposition to each other, both aiming to cover primary and secondary education (though, in the event, the Left-wing Federation has been more successful in implanting itself in secondary schools than the Moderate-Right Federation in the primary sector), one small and declining organization implanted mainly in the technical sector, and one small new organization on the far right, which in practice is largely limited to secondary schools, especially in the Paris area The percentage vote in the elections for parent representation on school management councils in 1972 – the first year in which such figures were published – was distributed as follows Left-wing - 60.53%, Moderate Right - 27.4%, Right-wing - 1.73%, Technical - 1.07% The numerical dominance of the Left-wing Federation reflects its firm hold on the primary sector, though it retains a clear majority even in the secondary sector (6)

The existence of these organizations further explains some of the decisions which were reached in the wake of the 1968 upheaval *Les Evénements* laid bare a great sense of alienation towards society at large and the education system in particular *Participation* was de Gaulle's slogan for overcoming this The then Minister of Education, Edgar Faure writes that *Participation* is the antithesis of alienation in the sense that it tends to restore to man control over himself In short, participation

* A number of more or less similar proposals were under discussion at the time Jean Védrine (12) documents the evolution of ideas on participation, and the government commission of 1959 on church-state relations in education received many depositions in this sense (3) For the early sixties, see the various viewpoints advanced by progressive teachers in *Cahiers Pédagogiques*, 55, September/October 1965

means becoming human again (2, pp 244-245) ' The task which Faure faced in July 1968 was how to give to such grandiose ideals some sort of legal and administrative reality – and how to do it very fast. Clearly, if organizations were already in existence claiming to represent parental opinion they were likely to be incorporated into new schemes of participation. The fact that the Federations disagreed with each other was in a sense an advantage, as it permitted 'democratic' (i.e., voting) machinery to be set up, thus giving parents some feeling of choice without committing the authorities to any particular policy. In the light of the Gaullist landslide in the elections of June 1968, voting was also seen as something likely to limit the influence of the militant left, and it is interesting to contemplate how rapidly the infant Right-wing Federation received official recognition, when compared with the Ministry's post-1958 cold-shouldering of the large and successful Left-wing Federation, the 1962 circular, with its banning of teacher membership, had been deliberately drawn up to exclude the only federation which formally included teachers. Although the formal link with teachers' unions was severed in 1969, informal relations remain close. The severance corresponded to the inauguration of the post-1968 structure of participation, in which teachers' and parents' representatives were elected separately.

Finally, the fact that the existing federations (notably the Moderate-Right) had already produced elaborate plans for parent participation meant that parts of their blueprints were incorporated into the new legislation and administrative regulations of the 1968-69 period. In this area, as in others, 1968 can be explained neither as evolution nor revolution, the picture is rather of a bureaucratic machine of great strength and staying-power suddenly reacting to violent external political pressure by ingesting ideas and institutions which had been evolving for many years in isolation from the bureaucracy itself.

THE PARENTS

A paper of this sort is necessarily based on the statements of an activist minority, as recorded in the multifarious publications of the federations or in personal interviews. This is reflected in the stress laid on ideological questions (*laïcité*, left versus right, etc.) This perspective needs to be corrected by considering the contribution and attitude of the average French parent subscribing to these organizations.

In the first place, it needs to be stated that parents who are also members of federations are in a minority, albeit a strong one. Accurate numbers are

difficult to come by, but Jean Védrine (12) estimated that in 1970 about a third of parents in the state sector were enrolled, and about half in the Catholic sector. Similarly, only a minority — presumably for the most part the same minority — participates even to the extent of voting in the autumn elections for school *conseils d'administration* (management councils), the proportion fell from 41% in 1971 to 38.28% in 1973 (6).

If one may draw conclusions from private conversations and from exhortations published in the magazines of the federations, the average parent member is fairly passive. Given that he or she can vote for parent representatives without belonging to any association, what does the average member gain from membership?

Firstly, he or she obtains rather generalized benefits analogous to those accruing to members of a trade-union. (Indeed, the Left-wing Federation, with its trade-union origin and backing, is on occasion described by its president as *le syndicat des parents d'élèves*.) As pressure-groups, the federations operated, at least until 1968, largely at national level, because that was where the decisions were taken. Parents' representatives sat on the various consultative bodies clustering round the Ministry of Education, and much informal lobbying took place. Probably the average local member had little awareness of this sort of activity, rather he was, and is, dimly aware that, through the machinery of his association, information, advice and support are available in a way that an unsupported individual could never hope to achieve. In cases of conflict between parents and school, this can be a considerable advantage, especially in France, where a detailed knowledge of the *modus operandi* of the bureaucracy is a necessary (though not sufficient) precondition of successful negotiation.

Secondly, all the federations issue informative magazines to their members. Especially with the large federations (Moderate-Right, Catholic and Left-wing), these are attractively produced popular publications consisting mainly of uncontroversial articles about the upbringing of children — how to keep them healthy, encourage them to read, teach them to swim, supervise their homework, etc. Although ideological 'pep-talks' are present and are what distinguish these journals one from another, the ideological element is by no means dominant. Four of the five federations issue a more business-like 'party-line' publication which its

activists may read in addition to the general magazine *

Thirdly, the federations provide certain services which parents need. For example, they organize holiday camps for children or courses and exchanges abroad for those learning foreign languages. More surprisingly, perhaps, they run schemes of insurance to cover children against accidents at school and to provide third-party cover against claims arising from damage or injury caused by children. Many people thus join a federation in rather the same spirit that British motorists join the AA or the RAC — for the benefits, rather than because they approve of their associations' national policy on road building, of which they may not even be aware. Certainly the recruitment literature of the federations, which is deployed every autumn at the start of the school year, lays considerable stress on the merits of their insurance policies.

CONCLUSION

Are we then to conclude that the ideological aspect of French parent associations is a mere fiction, and that the verbal battles still being fought over *laïcité* are mere echoes of the real battle which was waged over the last quarter of the 19th century, but is now artificially prolonged by an unrepresentative *élite*? Clearly there is a good deal of truth in this. Recent opinion polls suggest that the French electorate at large is substantially in favour of the present church-state compromise in education (cf. 7). To fit late 20th century arguments into mid-19th century categories does not, on the whole, assist clear thought or calm decision-making, and the concept of *laïcité* is often stretched to breaking-point, as for example in the recent controversy over sex education (1). In their public pronouncements at

* At present, the Federations' main publications are as follows (where two journals are named, the first is the more popular, the second is the activists' newsletter): (i) Centre-Right *La Voix des Parents*, *PEEP Informations*, (ii) Technical *Parents d'Élèves*, (iii) Catholic *La famille éducatrice*, *UNAPEL Bulletin d'Animation et d'Information*, (iv) Left-wing *Pour l'enfant, vers l'homme*, *La famille et l'école*, (v) Right-wing *Présence des Parents*, *UNA.A.P.E Informations*. It would be a harrassing task to write a reliable history of these publications, which tend over the years to change titles, character and frequency of issue. For example, *Présence des Parents*, No. 1, appeared in October 1969, thereafter, it seems to have disappeared until the *Nouvelle Série*, No. 1, was published in November 1973. The publications of older federations are now much more stable, especially the popular magazines, *La Voix des Parents*, *La Famille éducatrice*, and *Pour l'enfant, vers l'homme* are on sale to the public, though presumably most copies go to federation members.

least, the *laïques* often seem to err by failing to realize how far Catholic opinion has evolved since 1905. While admittedly substantial regional differences persist, and in areas like the West old issues remain live longer than elsewhere, it seems clear that the majority of rank-and-file members of the federations are indifferent to the whole question. In many ways, this now serves as a convenient ideological bone of contention which mass organizations like the Moderate-Right and Left-wing Federations can squabble over, thus usefully reinforcing a sense of organizational solidarity and mutual antagonism which might otherwise grow faint. *Si la laïcité n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer*. But we must not be too cynical. Like 'working-class solidarity', *laïcité* seems to me to be a traditional fiction which still contains a good deal of life.

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