

The Prime Convict of the 5th Republic

by Nicolas Roussellier

Delphine Dulong analyses the role of the French Prime Minister, who does not so much embody a clearly-defined institution as a relational structure: a diarchy with the President, incessant interministerial work, parliamentary obligations. Is the job a powerful position, or that of an underling?

Reviewed: Delphine Dulong, *Premier ministre*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2021, 390 p., €25.

The first thing that must be said about this book is that everything about it is excellent! Its structure, its arguments, the fluidity of the writing. And yet, this was a risky task to take on. One might initially have thought that most things had already been said about the various aspects of the 5th Republic and its complicated relationship with the way its own institutions function. One might also have believed that the topic had already been exhausted through the main existent retellings of various episodes of political life since 1958.

But by specifically choosing the title of “Prime Minister” (without an article), and not “President of the Republic”, Delphine Dulong has had the excellent idea of decentring our gaze. This has allowed her not just to analyse all the different facets of this great “Prime Minister”, but also, and by having made this choice, to put forward a new way of thinking about the 5th Republic.

The Prime Minister and the Others

This is not a history of Prime Ministers under the Fifth Republic, nor is it a history of the Hôtel Matignon (the Prime Minister's official residence) as seen through an insular administrative history of the state. The challenge here is to take a political fact, examine it using the plural concept of the "role" and, starting from this point, to construct a historical sociology.

What the Prime Minister is cannot be deduced from constitutional articles, which at the end of the day only have a limited capacity for normative projection; it is easier to understand the position as the construction of a role that is defined through confrontation with other players and therefore other offices. The Prime Minister, therefore, does not so much embody a clear and well-defined institution as a relational structure: a sort of constantly evolving hub – as is the Hôtel Matignon, which is situated at a crossroads between interministerial work (arbitrations), the parliamentary obligations of the Prime Minister and the informal work of pure politics (holding onto one's majority, managing one's party, managing one's communication, etc.).

The first part of the book describes the main relational dynamics that have shaped the "role" of Prime Minister: that of the constant confrontation which both binds and opposes them to the President of the Republic. We know that early observers of the Fifth Republic had put forward the concept of a "diarchy". One of the great qualities of the approach Delphine Dulong has chosen to take is that she has kept this idea, but constantly develops it further.

The stable and happy version of the diarchy was a utopia which the two founders of this regime, de Gaulle and Michel Debré, believed in – or at least half-believed in. The President would be able to limit their activity to occupying a position of political pre-eminence (*auctoritas*) without having to intervene in the management of specific cases (*potestas*). In this system, the Prime Minister had real influence, since it was them who controlled the power to make decisions on a day-to-day basis, and who monitored the development of public policies.

Subordination

But the Prime Minister's administrative power did not prevent this role from becoming "dominated" by that of the President – quite the contrary, in fact. This says a lot about the subtle power of political factors. Giving "power" to someone and assigning them multiple tasks does not carry much weight in the face of the instruments of pure politics. When de Gaulle forced his Prime Minister to come and meet him at Orly airport every time he returned from a presidential trip, the symbolic power of this action, which was amplified a hundredfold through television broadcasts, prevailed over anything that might have resulted out of the management of specific cases.

A sign of subordination is stronger than any other consideration. Since the 1960s, the general trend has been a constant increase in the Élysée Palace's ability to influence the choice of certain ministers, and then the choice of cabinet members, and to increase the number of presidential advisers required to assert the presence of the President in meetings organised in the Hôtel Matignon – which says a lot about the weakness of the initial utopia, which suggested it was possible to draw a line between the administrative and the political.

The role of the Prime Minister is even more "dominated" when the construction of one's image depends on what the media say. Journalists have gradually given credence to the idea that, apart from in the case of a coalition government, the Prime Minister must be one of the President's "faithfuls". This correspondingly reduces the Prime Minister's pure political power so that, for example, their general policy statement is viewed as a simple reiteration of the President's discourse.

Any deviation from this role of faithfulness is immediately "chronicled" in the press: it is interpreted as an "incongruous wavering" (p. 73) of the diarchy, and not as the legitimate resource of a Prime Minister trying to assert their role (which would be consistent with the Constitution!). Symbolically and as viewed by the media, the role is thus one of a "dominated" figure, even if the Hôtel Matignon still undeniably enjoys greater administrative power than the Élysée Palace.

Head of Government

The second part of the book analyses the aspect of the Prime Minister as “head of government”. Here, Delphine Dulong shows how much the Prime Minister has *gained* governmental power throughout the Fifth Republic. Starting with Michel Debré, the Council of Ministers has been increasingly neutralised. Unlike in the two parliamentary republics (the Third and the Fourth), the various ministers are no longer representatives of a party that the Prime Minister (the President of the Council) must always – or is at least well-advised to – listen to if they want to preserve their fragile coalition majority.

The majority structure of the Fifth Republic – the assurance, or near-assurance, of having a disciplined majority in the National Assembly – thus mainly benefits the head of government: any arbitrations or decisions are made under their aegis (there are 4 or 5 RIMs or “*réunions interministérielles*” – “interministerial meetings” – per working day), whereas the Council of Ministers no longer appears to be a space of political deliberation (p. 110).

The Prime Minister, in their role as commander-in-chief of public policies (which are almost always of an interministerial nature), benefits from the “decollegialisation” of the government (Chapter 6). Under François Fillon, the Prime Minister “kept in check” his various ministers through the practice of individual performance evaluations, orchestrated by a private consultancy firm. In this sense, the Prime Minister under the Fifth Republic probably went as far, or even further than the British Prime Minister in the management of the machinery of government.

But, while the role itself is strong, it remains the case that it is attributed by the President of the Republic. At any moment, even when they are in a strong position in relation to their ministers or to public opinion, the Prime Minister can be dismissed by the President. Again, the Prime Minister has no hold over the heart of politics. There is a difference between strength and power.

Concessions and Attentions

In her third part, Delphine Dulong revisits a familiar aspect of the Fifth Republic and of the classic narrative that is told about it: that of the “*fait majoritaire*” (“majority

structure”, a concept in French constitutional law according to which the system should favour the President of the Republic being supported by a strong parliamentary majority from their own camp), which is both a “miracle” and a “mirage” (p. 197). The discipline of the majority gives the Prime Minister a unique level of leeway in rapidly – sometimes even extremely rapidly – orchestrating the voting of governmental draft bills.

But this discipline did not just appear out of nowhere: a huge amount of political work went into establishing it, work that has constantly increased since Pompidou. A large swathe both of the Prime Minister’s formal and informal schedule is thus taken up with managing relations with members of parliament.

Delphine Dulong re-examines the overly formulaic concept of members of parliament as “yes-men”. She highlights all the different aspects of what she calls a “symbolic commerce”(p. 234) between the Prime Minister and members of parliament from the majority.

Rather than being governed by coercion or threats, this relation is constructed around numerous small concessions and attentions, such as the acceptance of an amendment, the attribution of an assignment, or simply the fact of having an open ear for the advice or feedback from the “field” offered by deputies and senators. A whole subtle range of low-key relationships supports the learning of voting discipline.

Greyness or Saliency?

In the fourth and last section, Delphine Dulong situates all of the players on the media and political stage. This allows her to insist on and draw conclusions from the way images work. It also offers us the best way of understanding the “contradictory injunctions”(p. 288) that weigh on successive Prime Ministers.

Either they agree to a “duty of greyness”, to use the expression coined by Michel Rocard (p. 304), and they run no risk of overshadowing the President. Or they accept their “media saliency”(p. 311), with the risk this implies of creating a tension between the Hôtel Matignon and the Élysée Palace. Either way, they lose out.

In these terms, the famous expression “the hell of Matignon” does not just apply to the exhausting rhythm of the work, but even more to the dilemma connected to the

“role” that involves at once being forced to perform self-effacement before the primacy of the President, but still being obliged to manage the day-to-day business of public policies and the prosaic nature of “working” with the majority in the Parliament.

All in all, we can only rejoice in having such a book at our disposal – a book we had not seen the likes of up until now. Delphine Dulong is the first person to consider all aspects of the question rather than adopting a specialised approach. The strength of this book rests just as much with its contents as with the methodological approach which it manages to establish from one page to the next: it shows that, be it through sociology or history, the study of institutions remains essential to understanding politics – as long as we understand these institutions as being in constant flux. This may seem like an obvious point, but it is useful to be reminded of it.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, on 31 March 2022. Translated by Kate McNaughton, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, 11 April 2024.