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The *Ligue de l'Enseignement* and the French State since 1950: Between Influence and Dissonance

Introduction

The *Ligue de l'Enseignement* (League of Education) is a French confederation of popular education, a secular and republican movement born at the end of the nineteenth century, which today has more than one million members.¹ The organisation aims at educating and informing citizens, to free them from the influence of heteronomy and to foster their critical thinking. When it was founded, the aim was to prevent authoritarian leaders from gaining power through elections, as was the case in 1848 with Louis Napoléon Bonaparte, the future emperor Napoléon III. Jean Macé, founder of the League, believed that uneducated citizens should not be given suffrage. The organisation thus played a key role in establishing the Third Republic in France and in spreading republican ideals. Several of its members served as ministers in government. We can consider the organisation's activities as an extension of those of the state, through the various extra-curricular and cultural activities it organises. It is closer to the left of the political spectrum, with links to socialist networks and freemasonry.

This specific relationship with the state is one of the distinctive features of the League's identity. The other distinctive feature is that, right from its foundation, the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* has focused on the fight against Catholic clericalism, mainly in schools. This commitment was evident from the very founding of the movement and lasted until the 1980s and 1990s. The end of the twentieth century saw the failure of its school struggles for a particular way of organising the French educational system and the opening of the League to other militant actions.

Today, the League is France's main secular organisation in terms of membership and affiliated associations. It is also the largest associative movement in the country. In addition to the one million members it claims, it brings together 20,000 affiliated associations and receives some €25 million in public subsidies a year. An analysis of this organisation is therefore enlightening for understanding the evolution of the French secular world since 1950, the changes in its rela-

¹ See the website of the organisation. Accessed 23 January 2024, <https://laligue.org/presentation/>.

tionship with public authorities and, more generally, the redefinition of the place of associations and intermediary bodies in France.

Over this period, the overall picture is one of declining influence for the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* among public decision-makers. However, it is useful to clarify the periodisation and to understand the reasons for the distancing that is taking place between this secular organisation and the state. Three periods stand out: the first, from the 1950s to the 1980s, saw the League's influence waning in the face of an unfavourable political context and an inappropriate strategy on the part of the organisation; the second, from the 1980s to the early 2000s, corresponds to a revival in the impact of the *Ligue de l'Enseignement*, which succeeded in positioning itself as an expert on secular issues in the eyes of public decision-makers. The final period, from the early 2000s to the present day, sees the League evolve from a tutelary, partnership-based relationship with the state to a more distant and contractual one. The movement is struggling to disseminate its *laïque* project in a now secularised society. Its influence on state decisions has become far more relative.

This chapter describes the characteristics of the relationship between the state and the League over these three periods. The research is based primarily on an analysis of the archives of the organisation's confederation, as well as on interviews with leaders of the associative movement.

The 1950s to the 1980s: A Lack of Influence on the State

While the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* was particularly influential under the Third Republic,² it appears that at the start of the Fifth Republic, this secular movement no longer had much impact on the policies put in place by the government. Indeed, in 1959 the Debré law was passed, allowing public funding of private faith-based schools, legislation that ran counter to the values and principles that the League had been striving to defend since its foundation. In 1984, the project for a unified, secular public education service, known as the Savary law, was definitively buried by a government that the League had supported. These two setbacks

2 See the works of Jean-Paul Martin and Nathalie Sévilla on this period, in particular: Jean-Paul Martin, *La Ligue de l'enseignement. Une histoire politique (1866–2016)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2021); Nathalie Sévilla, *La Ligue de l'enseignement-Confédération générale des œuvres laïques, 1919–1939* (PhD dissertation, Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris, 2004). Nathalie Sévilla, "Mutation démocratique à la Ligue (1925–1940)," *Agora débats/jeunesse* 40 (2006): 10–21.

led to a profound questioning of the organisation's *laïque* identity from the mid-1980s onwards. They reflected the League's lack of influence with public decision-makers.

The first of these two setbacks can be explained by an unfavourable political context. General de Gaulle's government enjoyed a large majority in parliament, while the SFIO (the socialist *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière*) and the PC (the Communist Party), left-wing parties to which the League was politically closer, won only 50 of the 579 seats in the November 1958 legislative elections. In addition, the supporters of private education had the support of many deputies and senators, through the *Association Parlementaire pour la Liberté de l'Enseignement* (Parliamentary Association for the Freedom of Education – APLE), one of the most influential pressure groups of the early Fifth Republic. In May 1959, it included 380 deputies (out of a total of 579) and 160 senators (out of a total of 301).³ On several occasions, it managed to influence the government's position and put the school question on the political agenda when it deemed necessary. While General de Gaulle initially wanted to reform private education by ordinance once the Fifth Republic was in place, he finally agreed to a parliamentary settlement of the issue. The action of the APLE was not unrelated to the president's change of mind.⁴ It initiated the debate in the National Assembly by questioning the Prime Minister on the subject, even though he had not wanted to discuss it.

While the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* had a large network of sympathetic MPs under the Third Republic,⁵ it no longer enjoyed such support under the Fifth Republic. It simply did not have the means to compete with the catholic lobbying force, all the more so in the face of a government that favoured dualistic schooling. It had even less means to do so, as it was going through a crisis of governance that weakened it. As parliament prepared to pass legislation granting public subsidies to private denominational schools, thus endorsing pluralism in education, the League had to overcome a leadership crisis and rebalance a delicate budgetary sit-

3 Figures provided in Aline Coutrot, "La loi scolaire de décembre 1959," *Revue française de science politique* 13 1965 357.

4 Coutrot, "La loi scolaire de décembre 1959," 355.

5 See, for instance, Nathalie Sévilla, "Confédération générale des œuvres laïques (1925–1940): une organisation socioculturelle en politique," in *Ligue de l'enseignement, un objet politique à identifier*, edited by Eric Favey, Alain Kerlan and André Robert (Paris: Ligue de l'enseignement, 2012), 17–18; the League "solicits parliamentary friends and members of the League to create and maintain a secular parliamentary group, both in the Chamber and in the Senate. Through the latter, it prepares draft legislation for all school-related matters [. . .]. The League influences the promulgation of circulars and memos in all matters relating to the school system, such as the simplification of formalities for avoiding religious education in Alsace-Moselle. Conversely, the League is mobilized to prevent bills from coming to fruition".

uation. In April 1959, the organisation was more than FRF100 million short of its invoices. This situation undermined the League's governing bodies; a new Secretary General was elected by a very slim majority, a sign of the internal divisions running through the organisation. The President of the organisation, who had just been re-elected, resigned. This internal crisis weakened the League at a particularly crucial time for its struggle. It was slow to organise, and actually mobilised against the law only in 1960, when the text had already been approved by parliament. Although demonstrations were organised by the secularists to denounce the text, they were not initiated by the League and had little impact on government policy. A vast petition campaign was organised, gathering over ten million signatures in the summer of 1960.⁶ Despite this strong mobilisation, the Debré law was not repealed. Indeed, its implementing decrees were even more favourable to private education than the law itself.⁷

The *Ligue de l'Enseignement* suffered another setback in 1984, initiated by a government close to its political positions, and in a political context that was now favourable to it. The secularist camp's error here was threefold, and distinct from that of 1959. First of all, it underestimated the French people's attachment to private schools. With the school question essentially framed in terms of conflict with catholic education, secular organisations were slow to realise that these institutions attracted the public, not so much for their denominational character as for the alternative they represented. In this way, the French gradually began to support a dualistic school system. When the Debré law was passed, 46 percent of the French said they were in favour of a monopoly, compared with 47 percent in favour of pluralism. In 1970, 61 percent of the population supported dualism at pri-

6 This figure is particularly eloquent concerning the 1959 electorate. As Anne-Marie Franchi explains, the petition garnered the equivalent of more than a majority of the votes cast by French citizens, with 10,813,697 signatures for an absolute majority of the electorate of 10,241,854 votes. Anne-Marie Franchi, "Laïcité, la parole à la défense . . .," *Pouvoirs* 75 (1995): 87. In my view, this argument undermines François Goguel's analysis that the scope of this petition was overestimated. "Firstly, [he points out], because in many départements where there are few free schools, it is clear that this petition was signed by M.R.P. and C.N.I. voters who certainly did not share the secular sensibilities of its promoters, but who nevertheless did not want to refuse the signature asked of them by their village teacher. Secondly, and more importantly, in most departments, the proportion of signatories to registered voters was much higher in rural cantons than in urban centers. [. . .] In any case, the urban France of the 1960s could probably not have remained fully sensitive to the politico-religious conflicts that had developed in the last decades of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th in a France that was still predominantly rural" François Goguel, "Religion et politique en France," *Revue française de science politique* 16 (1966): 1180.

7 The decree of 10 March 1964 enables teachers in private schools to take part in competitive examinations for public school teachers, by means of their own lists and choice of assignments.

mary level, and 59 percent at secondary level.⁸ In November 1983, 71 percent of French people were in favour of maintaining private education.⁹ However, the League was not aware of this change and it continued to approach the school dispute solely from a religious perspective. This changed at the end of the 1980s, particularly with its 1989 congress. The organisation's congress denounced "the *de facto* social segregation organised by commercial establishments and by many private denominational establishments under contract".¹⁰ School dualism was thus seen by the League as a social issue, rather than simply a question of denominational heteronomy.

The second reason for the failure of 1984 was that the secularists were unable to mobilise enough people to match their supporters in the mass street mobilisations. Anne-Marie Franchi, a member of the *Comité national d'action laïque* (National Committee for Secular Action – CNAL)¹¹ at that time, explains:

We were afraid of missing any centralised demonstration. So we held dispersed demonstrations. In '83, there were demonstrations in Chauny, Yssingaux, big towns, weren't there [. . .]. Épinal, Rodez, Arpajon and Marseille, at last! And there you have it. The CNAL's decentralised demonstrations at a time when things were so critical for us and when we should have been making ourselves heard in what we really had as a project.¹²

The figures back up her words: while supporters of private education managed to gather over one million people on a single day, on 24 June 1984, secular activists struggled to muster a million demonstrators over the course of a month (April 1984). What is more, the secularist manifestations were highly politicised, with the socialist and communist parties well represented, as were the teachers' unions. But in contrast to the demonstration organised by the private sector, the number of parents who turned out for the march appeared to be small.

Finally, the secularist side was undoubtedly too intransigent during the negotiations. It wanted to go beyond the text negotiated by the Minister of Education, Alain Savary, by tabling amendments in the National Assembly,¹³ which could not

8 Figures provided by Jean-Paul Visse, *La question scolaire 1975–1984* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1995): 260–261.

9 This data is taken from Jean-Marie Mayeur's article: "la guerre scolaire, ancienne ou nouvelle histoire ?," *Vingtième siècle* 5 (1995): 104.

10 Document saved in the National Archives, classification 20140057/239.

11 The *Comité national d'action laïque* was created in 1951 to bring together secular forces.

12 Anne-Marie Franchi, testimony given at the "journée des grands témoins" organised by the League of Education in 2014.

13 The Laignel amendments were designed to restrict the creation of private nursery schools, and to make the maintenance of a contract between private establishments and the State conditional on the gradual civil-servant status of at least half of the establishment's teachers.

be accepted by the supporters of private education. For the *Ligue de l'Enseignement*, these “amendments passed by the National Assembly [on 24 May 1984] saved the essentials, but having avoided the worst does not mean having obtained the best”.¹⁴ Antoine Prost, a historian specialising in educational issues, returns to this secular intransigence, which “destroyed, with the complicity of the president, the acceptable compromise that Alain Savary had succeeded in getting the representatives of private education to accept: hence the demonstration on 24 June, the exasperation of antagonisms and, on 12 July, the final withdrawal of the project by the President of the Republic”.¹⁵ Historically, one of the reasons for this intransigence was

the underestimation of the balance of power in public opinion. François Mitterrand's victory in 1981 was not, ipso facto, a victory for secular ideas. [An] IFOP poll¹⁶ [. . .] concluded that part of the left-wing electorate did not identify very well with the secularist struggle: 15 to 20 percent of the socialist electorate. However, the secular left rejected this finding. Alain Savary puts it clearly: “I shared the results of this survey with the main leaders of the CNAL. They didn't believe it, or pretended not to, some even questioning the seriousness of the work”.¹⁷

The League's archives confirm this analysis. They referred to “the right-wing's exploitation of public opinion through biased polls” and contested the results of surveys that were unfavourable to it.¹⁸ “The problem of manipulating figures is becoming increasingly acute. We've reached a period where no source is credible. [. . .] Once again, the people of the left have rallied around secularism”.¹⁹

Faced with the massive mobilisation of supporters of denominational schools and the failure of negotiations, President François Mitterrand decided to bury the bill in July 1984. The secularists were unable to take advantage of a political situation that was generally favourable to them.

¹⁴ Document saved in the archives of the League of Education.

¹⁵ Antoine Prost, “La loi Savary: les raisons d'un échec,” in *Alain Savary: politique et honneur*, edited by Serge Hurtig (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2002), 261.

¹⁶ Survey commissioned by the French Ministry of Education from IFOP on 26 May 1982. This study shows, among other things, the reasons why some families choose to send their children to private schools (discipline, quality of teaching, etc.) and confirms that 88 percent of parents of pupils attending state schools would like to be able to choose the school in which to send their child. See Prost, “La loi Savary: les raisons d'un échec,” 263–264.

¹⁷ Prost, “La loi Savary: les raisons d'un échec,” 270.

¹⁸ Document saved in the archives of the League of Education.

¹⁹ The quotation from the Board of Directors quoted above is taken from the minutes of a meeting of the statutory body held in the archives of the *Ligue de l'enseignement*.

Late 1980s to the Early 2000s: A Revival in the Impact of the *Ligue de l'Enseignement*

These two successive failures forced the League to rethink its mobilising ideal and extend secularism beyond the school question. It reformed its doctrinal base, revised its militant strategy and succeeded in influencing government policies. It has made a major shift in its secular identity by proposing dialogue with religions, particularly catholic institutions, which it had previously vigorously opposed. From 1987 onwards, several meetings were organised between two national secretaries and the general secretary of the League (Michel Morineau, Guy Gauthier and Jean-Louis Rollet) on the one hand, and the deputy general secretary of the French bishops' conference and a jesuit in favour of restructuring the church (Gaston Piétri, then Claude Cesbron and Henri Madelin) on the other. Discussions focused on morality, the history of *laïcité* and dualism in education. Joint conferences were organised, notably on the teaching of religious facts. This policy of openness enabled the League to distinguish itself from other secularist organisations, to gain visibility in public debate and to change the image of secularism often perceived as anti-religious and sectarian. Some media outlets described the organisation as a “renovator of secularism”, while the French Minister of Education hailed the League’s “strength of proposition”.²⁰

The openness of the themes encompassed by secularism was also demonstrated by the League’s recognition of the issues raised by islam and, more generally, by the cultural and religious diversification of French society. Here again, the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* distinguished itself from other French secularist movements. For example, when two veiled schoolgirls were expelled from their school in 1989 for refusing to remove their veils, the organisation adopted a moderate stance, encouraging dialogue rather than expulsion. The organisation feared that the schoolgirls would quit school, which would be detrimental to them, and denounced a misguided debate that focused less on religious symbols than on the issue of integration, reflecting the assimilationist tendencies of a dominant culture. Buoyed by the heightened media profile afforded by this dissonant position within the secular ‘camp’, the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* continued its work on islam and the issue of integration. It set up an Islam and Secularism Commission, made up of representatives of catholicism, protestantism, islam and members of the League, to reflect on the issues raised by these themes. Initially, the focus was on openness to cultural diversity. The League defended the distinction between nationality and citizenship, and wanted to enable foreigners to vote, at least in local elections. Its ap-

20 Lionel Jospin, *Le Monde* (July 9 and 10, 1989).

proach was truly one of *laïcité ouverte* ('open secularism'), then *laïcité plurielle* ('plural secularism'). It wanted to become a reference point for public authorities on questions of islam, diversity, immigration and, of course, *laïcité*. To this end, it called on researchers, organised numerous conferences and published several works on the subject. It wanted to be a source of proposals. It suggested developing economic secularism, a secularism that would promote "the growing and effective responsibility of workers in the management of companies" and work towards training employees.²¹ It defended secular humanism, defined as "a secular spirituality for a humanity in search of itself, in permanent creation by its own forces and particularly by those of the human spirit, in search of its own order, of its capacity to hold itself as the only end and the only way, while knowing that it cannot be its own model", secular because capable of "founding a way of thinking about man that is not dominated by any other way of thinking, whether religious, economic or political".

The League also put forward a secular morality, secular in both content and method. It was to be "a common morality contributing to education for living together and the transmission of values at the foundation of republican citizenship". In conjunction with its reflections on this issue, the League called for the establishment of a "secular covenant" in a document drawn up jointly with the French Protestant Federation in 1989, and then, from 2004 onwards, for a charter of *laïcité* capable of bringing together all the country's spiritual currents.

How did the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* manage to renew its approach to secularism in the face of an identity crisis that called into question its doctrinal foundation? How did it convince its militants of the relevance of such an evolution? This identity crisis was undoubtedly one of the most difficult that the League had to face. And yet, it is thanks to this crisis that it has undoubtedly succeeded in reinventing itself most effectively. It succeeded in the *tour de force* of reinventing a tradition in movement. The League thus evoked a 'return to the roots' of the concept of *laïcité* through openness to religions; it showed that this notion was, above all, a philosophy of emancipation, of freedom of conscience; a guarantee that man can reason autonomously, without the intervention of any authority that claims to be the exclusive holder of truth and knowledge. Recalling the historical, philosophical, political and even legal underpinnings of this principle was a response to a desire to clarify the content and application of this ideal. It allows the League to justify the school dispute on grounds other than religious ones.

21 Michel Morineau, *Laïcité en débat. Introduction à 1989* (1989), 46. Document saved in the National Archives, classification 20140057/23920140057/237.

Let us make no mistake: the movement was not unanimous in its support for the League's doctrinal evolution. However, the dissenting voices were simply too few in number or too discreet to be able to prevent the changes being made by the organisation's leadership.

Did this approach have the desired success? The *Ligue de l'Enseignement* has indeed succeeded in opening up its doctrinal field to new issues, and even in promoting new ideas on *laïcité*, such as the teaching of religious facts. This doctrinal overhaul has given the League the legitimacy in the scientific community that it had lost since the start of the Fifth Republic, and greater credibility with political decision-makers. As Françoise Lorcerie recalled in 1995:

Its representatives are the only academics to whom *Administration*, the journal of the prefectural administration, has opened its columns to frame the debate, in the issue it devoted in 1993 to '*L'État et les cultes*', with a preface by Charles Pasqua.²² Another clue: the League was entrusted with the production of the TDC²³ dossier on *laïcité* (No. 703, Nov. 1995). They constituted what we might call the "qualified opinion on *laïcité*".²⁴

What remains of this ambition today? The *Ligue de l'Enseignement* is still considered by the political authorities to be an expert on secular and educational issues, as illustrated by the organisation's numerous invitations addressed to it to participate in consultative bodies.²⁵ The content of the secular morality now integrated into school curricula was largely inspired by the League's proposals, which won over Vincent Peillon when he was head of the French Ministry of Education.²⁶ The *Charte de la laïcité expliquée aux enfants*, drafted by the organisation, is used in many public schools, as well as in numerous civics textbooks. But is the League still a point of reference for public decision-makers on questions of *laïcité*? Is it able to influence government positions on this issue? Clearly not.

²² Charles Pasqua was then Minister of the Interior.

²³ *Textes et documents pour la classe*, magazine of the Canopé network, publisher of the French Ministry of Education.

²⁴ Françoise Lorcerie, "Laïcité 1996. La République à l'école de l'immigration?," *Revue française de pédagogie* 117 (1996): 57.

²⁵ Haut conseil à l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes, Conseil d'orientation des politiques de jeunesse, Comité national de suivi du Fonds social européen, Commission professionnelle consultative des métiers du sport et de l'animation, Conseil supérieur de l'Éducation, etc.

²⁶ He was a member of the *Ligue de l'enseignement* in Picardie.

From a Tutelary Relationship with the State to a Contractual One

The ‘golden age’ of the *Ligue de l’Enseignement* under the Fifth Republic began to decline in the early 2000s, at least in terms of its ideological influence. It was also evident, even before this period, in the decline in membership and the number of affiliated associations. But what is particularly interesting in this analysis is the evolution of its relationship with public authorities. I will use two examples to illustrate this point: the case of *mis à disposition* (‘placed at disposal’)²⁷ and new public management.

As we can see, the relationship with the state is no longer one of tutelage or partnership, but of contract. The League, whose identity was to some extent that of a public authority, is now approaching that of a social economy enterprise. In the *Ligue de l’Enseignement*, as in other secular extra-curricular movements, teachers *mis à disposition* by the French Ministry of Education were ‘the backbone’ of the organisation: in 2006, the Ministry of Education definitively abolished the status of *mis à disposition*. Between 1986 and 2012, the League saw their number drop from 750 to 150. In the 2009 to 2012 period alone the number of seconded staff fell by almost 50 percent.²⁸ The new employees are professionals specifically trained in associative management. They are no longer civil servants. This inevitably has an impact on the League’s identity. In 1989, for example, the Board of Directors expressed regret that “the League [was] managed at all levels by primary school teachers”.²⁹ Ten years later, however, such an assessment can no longer be made, given the survey carried out in 1998 among the movement’s associative managers.³⁰ When asked about their status, 36 percent said they were teachers (with an unclear distinction made between ‘teachers’ and ‘other teaching staff’). Public-sector employees accounted for 52 percent of the association managers questioned (figure 1).

27 We could translate *mis à disposition* as ‘made available’ or ‘placed at disposal’. This status concerns civil servants, teachers in our case, ‘made available’ by the Ministry of National Education to work in the League.

28 Guillaume Meugnier, “Mutations fonctionnelles et référentielles des modèles de coopération entre associations d’éducation populaire et pouvoirs publics: l’exemple du partenariat entre la Ligue de l’enseignement et le ministère de l’Éducation nationale” (PhD dissertation, Institut d’études politiques de Grenoble, 2014), 183.

29 Document saved in the archives of the Ligue de l’enseignement.

30 It should be remembered that the study was carried out among 703 association managers, who do not necessarily represent a representative portrait of the movement. We assume that, insofar as they responded to the questionnaire submitted, these leaders are active members of the organisation.

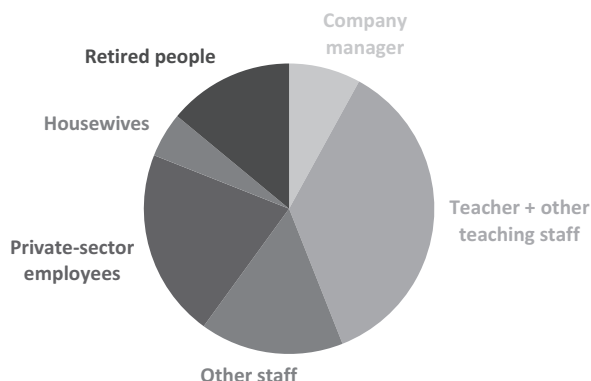


Figure 1: Status of associative managers in 1998.

The diversification of profiles is less clear-cut, however, when it comes to candidates for the Board of Directors. While primary school teachers are no longer in the majority, staff from the French education system still dominate (figure 2).

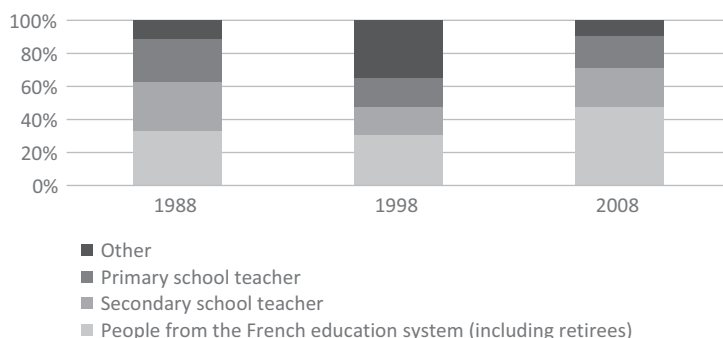


Figure 2: Status of candidates for the League's board of directors (1998–2008).

While the number of primary school teachers has dropped (albeit relatively), the number of candidates from the national education system has risen (inspectors, educational advisors, head teachers, etc.).³¹ The impact of the end of the *mis à disposition* status thus seems less obvious at the level of the governing bodies than in the organisation as a whole.

³¹ See General Secretariat circular no. 29.01.05 of 4 May 2005. Document saved in the archives of the *Ligue de l'enseignement*.

The League is also facing another challenge: after having widely criticised the excesses of economic neo-liberalism, in particular a managerial culture that is more interested in results than in projects as such, the organisation is forced to integrate the logic of new public management into its practices, despite the fact that this is the antithesis of the ideals it defends. Indeed, new public management proposes to modernise administrations by introducing tools derived from private sector practices and the market economy. For associations dependent on state funding, this new public management entails far-reaching changes: the gradual disappearance of subsidies in favour of public procurement competition between associations, as well as with the for-profit private sector, the introduction of efficiency assessment tools and the delegation of state missions to private sector workers. From now on, associations must prove their social utility³² and assert their specificity, their ‘added value’ in relation to other components of the social economy. The importation of new public management methods to relations between the state and the associative world raises fears about the preservation of the latter’s specific features, by assimilating the for-profit and nonprofit sectors, and pushing its players to integrate competitive market logics into their management.³³ The *Ligue de l’Enseignement* is rethinking its relationship with politics, and with the state in particular, in order to adapt to this new situation. For the organisation, this means appropriating the integration of new public management, by implementing a mode of operation that borrows certain features of this economic tool within its network.

To bring its discourse into line with its practices, which now incorporate this new public management, the League is evolving in its positions. In June 2012, it published an article entitled “Les possibilités insoupçonnées du new public management. A lesson for associations?”, in which it said:

Since its origins, “new public management” has been associated with neo-liberalism, sharing its naiveties and excesses. Since then, it has had a bad press. But we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater: some of the innovations that have flourished over the last 30 years offer new ways of doing things, which may resonate with the practices of the associative world.³⁴

32 Laurent Besse, Frédéric Chateigner and Florence Ihaddadene, “L’éducation populaire,” *Savoirs* 3 (2016): 11–49.

33 Jean-Louis Laville and Anne Salmond, “Introduction,” in *Associations et action publique*, edited by Jean-Louis Laville and Anne Salmond (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2015), 7–25.

34 Ligue de l’enseignement, *Les Services publics sont-ils condamnés?* (Paris: La Ligue de l’enseignement, 2012), 6.

While the relationship between the public authorities and the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* has evolved from a tutelary relationship to a contractual one, in reality this transformation has had only limited impact. Guillaume Meugnier, the organisation's former national secretary, explains that new public management did not "fundamentally alter the association's activities".³⁵ Indeed, the contracts entered into between the association and the Ministry leave the League a certain amount of leeway in terms of the actions it carries out, as long as these are in line with the Ministry's priorities. Similarly, the recent report on the organisation by the *Cour des Comptes* confirms the favourable situation enjoyed by the League. It urges the Ministry to step up its control over the use of subsidies granted to the League:

The confidence that the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* has long inspired in many of its partners, its presence throughout the country thanks to its departmental federations and its tens of thousands of volunteers, make it a valuable and frequent auxiliary of the public authorities, particularly the Ministry of Education. So much so, in fact, that the Ministry seems to have given up any effective control over the activities carried out by the League in return for the subsidy it pays to it, i.e. about 25 million euros a year. One of the factors explaining this lack of control is the implicitly lump-sum nature of this amount, corresponding to compensation for the end of the free provision of National Education staff.³⁶

The League's crisis is part of a wider crisis of ideologies and intermediary bodies, particularly on the left of the political spectrum. Traditional militancy was running out of steam, as the model of 'socialism' came to an end; right-wing ideas such as the defence of private enterprise and the efficacy of free trade were gaining ideological ground. Above all, the arrival of Emmanuel Macron as President of the Republic has somewhat 'redistributed' the cards. Faced with the disintegration of the Socialist Party, militants have lost one of the main points of reference for their commitment. The League's leaders have been divided on the issue since 2017: while the organisation has always shown affinities with the left of the political spectrum, Nadia Bellaoui's arrival at the general secretariat has been synonymous with at least implicit support for Emmanuel Macron's policies, reflected by the absence of any criticism of them or the proposals of his Minister of National Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer. This doctrinal stance places the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* at odds with its traditional historical political commitment. Nadia Bellaoui's position was strongly criticised internally. She eventually lost her position. Finally, at a doctrinal level, the League's ideas no longer seemed to influence political power. The *law re-*

³⁵ Guillaume Meugnier, "Nouveau management public et stratégies associatives: la Ligue de l'enseignement," in Laville and Salmond, *Associations et action publique*, 52.

³⁶ Cour des Comptes, "Relevé d'observations provisoires. Comptes et gestion de la Ligue de l'enseignement," Fiscal year 2011–2016 (2016).

enforcing respect for the principles of the Republic, adopted in 2021, illustrates this. It aims at struggling against “separatism”, defined by the state as:

[A]ny action of destroying or weakening the national community in order to replace it with new forms of allegiance and identification that break with the democratic and republican tradition. Separatism is based on an ideological approach designed to cut the individual citizen off from his or her national framework. It asserts itself against the nation as the source of collective identity, by establishing definitive barriers between individuals and groups.³⁷

Religious separatism is actually the main target of the law. While the League states that “nothing must be yielded to those who claim that the laws of their god are superior to the laws of the Republic”, including islamists, hinduists, evangelicals, orthodox jews and fundamentalist catholics, it considers that separatism is not only religious but also economic and social. The League is particularly critical of possible applications of the law to the associative (voluntary or nonprofit) sector, notably, that

administrative authorities may assess the ‘republican’ character of associative activities on the basis of a decree, entailing the right to demand reimbursement of subsidies received. This subjects associations to considerable legal insecurity and therefore to risks of fragility at a time when society needs them more than ever [. . .]. To make subsidies, or more notably the issuing of approvals, conditional on a commitment to refrain from any action prejudicial to public order, a notion that is largely open to interpretation, is to limit the associations’ ability to challenge or the possibility of civil disobedience actions, which have enabled so many democratic advances.³⁸

However, its positions were not echoed by the government or members of parliament.

37 “La stratégie gouvernementale pour lutter contre le séparatisme et les atteintes à la citoyenneté,” Secrétariat général du Comité interministériel de prévention de la délinquance et de la radicalisation, accessed 23 January 2024, <https://www.cipdr.gouv.fr/islamisme-et-separatisme/#:~:text=Qu%27entend%2Don%20par%20%C2%AB%20s%C3%A9paratisme%20%C2%BB%20%3F,la%20tradition%20d%C3%A9mocratique%20et%20r%C3%A9publicaine>.

38 “Séparatismes. Un communiqué de la Ligue de l’enseignement,” Charles Conte, accessed 23 January 2024, See the press release of the League online: https://blogs.mediapart.fr/edition/lai cite/article/210920/separatismes?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=Shar ing&xtor=CS3-67.

Conclusion

The relationship between the state and the *Ligue de l'enseignement* has been divided into three phases since 1950: until the 1980s, the organisation had no real impact on the political authorities. Its activist strategy was ineffective; situated on the left of the political spectrum, it was unable to influence a right-wing government during those years. From the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, it became a benchmark organisation for secularism and education. It was a driving force behind proposals and was listened to attentively by the government, particularly when the left is in power. Since then, however, the organisation has been in retreat. Financial and governance crises have weakened it and it is struggling to make its voice heard in public debate. While the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* has played a part in spreading republican values and ideals, it has to be said that it no longer has any real influence on state policy. It is no longer a privileged partner of the public authorities and submits to the demands of the contractual relationship that has been established with them. In this way, it accepts the principles of new public management, principles which are supported by the economic neo-liberalism it denounces. The same can be said of secular issues. While the law on separatism adopted in 2021 contradicts the vision of secularism defended by the organisation since the 1990s, the League's criticism of this legislation focuses on associative freedom and not on the actual content of the secularism it defends.

This relative influence of the League on the state is not peculiar to this secular organisation but affects all the intermediary bodies in France. There are many reasons for this: changes in activism, new political circumstances (decline in the values defended by the left, in particular), new relationship between the state and French associations, are among the most important ones.

However, the French secularist movements, and more specifically the *Ligue de l'Enseignement*, remain a force for proposals and renewal of the secular question. At a time marked by a certain fragility of democracy, by a doctrinal crisis and by a loss of meaning in our societies, these lines of thought undoubtedly deserve our attention.

