

Aristide Briand: defending the Republic through economic appeasement

Robert Boyce

Aristide Briand occupied a major place in the politics of the Third Republic. For nearly twenty years he was a prominent political activist and journalist. Then, upon entering parliament he was eleven times *président du Conseil* and a minister on no less than twenty-five occasions, participating in government almost continuously from 1906 to 1917, in 1921-1922 and again from 1925 to 1932. Never during his thirty-year parliamentary career, however, did he take responsibility for a ministry of commerce, industry or finance or participate in debates on fiscal policy or budget reform. It might be said, indeed, that of all the leading politicians of the Third Republic he was one of the least interested in economic issues. Since he repeatedly altered his political posture before and after entering parliament, his approach to economics is difficult to define. Nevertheless it is possible to identify certain underlying beliefs that informed his political behaviour and shaped his economic views. In order to analyse these beliefs, their evolution and their instrumentalisation, the present paper will treat his public life in three stages: the long period before entering parliament, the period from 1902 to the war when he established his reputation as a progressive political leader, and the period from 1914 to 1932 when he became France's leading statesman. As will be seen, changing circumstances led him repeatedly to alter his posture towards economic choices, but in the second stage he became associated with potentially important domestic social and economic reforms, and in the third stage with potentially important international economic reforms. In neither case did he implement these reforms, which then and later raised doubts as to his commitment to them or the coherence of his ideas. His underlying motives, nonetheless, seem to have been clear and consistent, and intimately linked to his commitment to Republican solidarity.

The Establishment and Evolution of Republican Economic Attitudes (1862-1902)

For most of his years in parliament, Briand sat as a *Républicain de gauche* and occupied the benches in the centre of the *hémicycle*. But in the preceding twenty years he was a radical activist, pamphleteer and journalist who professed his commitment to socialism and revolutionary syndicalism, while hinting at times of sympathy for *boulangisme* and anarchism. Even after entering parliament and breaking with the *Parti socialiste (SFIO)*, he continued to call himself a *socialiste*

indépendant. It is useful to consider what he meant by these doctrines and their part in shaping his attitude to economic choices.

In 1884, at the age of 22 Briand began to contribute occasional articles to *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, a thrice-weekly journal in Nantes begun in 1883, which bore the sub-title '*organe des intérêts ouvriers, commerciaux, agricoles & maritimes*'. He signed his first articles 'Rien' or 'Léon Rien', which suggested sympathy with anarchism, and employed an urgent, provocative and angry tone. Language aside, however, his political point of view scarcely differed from that of the *radicals* led by Georges Clemenceau who had split from the *opportunistes* of the *Union républicaine* that same year and were to reunite only long enough to keep the anti-republican conservatives from regaining control in the second round of the legislative elections the following year. Thus, in his first newspaper article on 17 August 1884, he decried the modest constitutional reforms recently introduced by the *opportuniste* leader Jules Ferry: '*ce burlesque vaudeville que Ferry nomme "Le Congrès" et que j'appellerai, moi plus justement, "l'écoeurante prostitution de la Chambre"*'.¹ On other occasions his targets were the government's 'policy of adventures' in China and elsewhere, driven, he claimed, by '*mesquines spéculations*',² the Concordat with Rome, the obstacle posed by the churches to free thought and progress, and the need for state-led economic development.³ But perhaps his outlook was best revealed by the second article of his career, published on 31 August 1884 and entitled, '*Sera-t-elle pacifique ou sanglante?*' Here he affirmed that a great social revolution was under way throughout the western world. It was, he suggested, both inevitable and welcome, but, as in Russia and England where great dock strikes were shaking the country, it would turn violent if the dominant financial élite - the 'financial autocracy', which had replaced the landed autocracy in the new Republic - did not make timely concessions to the emerging urban classes. In particular, he warned of the need for workers to be directly represented in parliament and for an end to public corruption, especially in access to public sector employment.⁴

In September 1885, shortly before the legislative elections that year, he set aside his pseudonym to write under his own name, but neither the style nor the substance of his journalism changed. The *légitimistes*, he wrote on 18 September, were seeking votes by accusing the republicans of squandering taxpayers' money and engaging in costly colonial wars, when they themselves had been much more profligate with money and lives.⁵ On 30 September, the day before the first ballot, he urged local peasants and farmers to reject the *légitimistes*' appeal. The current slump in wheat

¹ Rien, "*Alea jacta est*," *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, 17 août 1884, p. 1.

² Léon Rien, "La France en armes!," *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, 4 février 1885, p. 1.

³ See for instance, Léon Rien, "4 Septembre!," *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, 3 septembre 1884, p. 1; "Nouvelles locales et régionales: Dandade!," *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, 5 septembre 1884, p. 1; "Enterrement civil et libre-pensée," *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, 24 octobre 1884, p. 1; "Opportunisme et résultats," *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, 25 January 1885, p. 1.

⁴ Léon Rien, "Sera-t-elle pacifique ou sanglante?," *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, 31 août 1884, p. 1. See also Aristide Briand, "La candidature ouvrière," *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, 11 septembre 1885, p. 1; Aristide Briand, "Danger!," *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, 13 novembre 1885, p. 1.

⁵ Aristide Briand, "La vérité," *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, 18 septembre 1885, p. 1.

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prices, he pointed out, was mainly due to the glut of stocks on world markets, and unlike their imperialist predecessors, republican governments had demonstrated their readiness to intervene in the market in order to protect domestic producers.⁶ In November 1886 Briand severed his connection with *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, ostensibly because it could no longer accommodate his radical views, and became editor of *L'Ouest républicain*, a new regional paper launched by Jean Pelloutier, the father of Fernand, his closest friend, and *commis principal des postes et télégraphes* in Saint-Nazaire.⁷ In May 1888, describing himself as a *radical*, Briand was elected as a municipal councillor in Saint-Nazaire. By the end of the decade, he and Fernand Pelloutier were active members of the local section of Jules Guesde's *Parti ouvrier français*, but their main interest was in organising workers through syndicalism. In April 1892 they opened the *Bourse du Travail* in Saint-Nazaire. In August 1892 Briand established the first workers' *syndicat* in Brière. That summer the two young men drafted a document, '*De la révolution par la grève générale*', which although never published or circulated was evidently intended as a manual for revolutionary syndicalists.⁸ In September of that year Briand argued the case for the general strike at the congress of the *Fédérations des Syndicats et groupes corporatifs ouvriers de France*, meeting in Marseille, and at the congress of the *Parti ouvrier français*, held immediately afterwards in the same town.⁹

In the legislative elections of 1885 he had endorsed the candidacy of Fidèle Simon, a moderate republican, in the columns of *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*. He chose to be a candidate himself in the legislative elections of 1889 when he ran against Simon as the '*candidat radical révisionniste*', a label that suggested at least some sympathy for *boulangisme*.¹⁰ After coming a respectable third he stepped aside to enable Simon to hold his seat against the conservative candidate. Having moved to Paris in February 1893, he again entered the legislative elections that year in the la Villette district of the 19th *arrondissement*, this time as a '*socialiste révolutionnaire*'. The year had been marked by exceptional political tension, with student demonstrations on the Left bank, socialist demonstrations elsewhere in the city, repeated anarchist acts of terrorism, a police siege of the Paris *Bourse du Travail*, and the use of troops to close down the *Bourse*. Briand participated in several of these violent confrontations, and several times in the autumn of 1893 he addressed striking miners in northern France. In 1894 he attracted national attention by taking on the legal defence of Emile Henry, the anarchist who planted the bomb on the terrace of the Hôtel Terminus near the Gare Saint-Lazare, which killed several innocent bystanders.¹¹

Shortly after arriving in Paris in 1893, Briand began writing for *La Lanterne*, the Paris journal owned by the financier and former *boulangiste* Eugène Mayer. The

⁶ Aristide Briand, "Un beau mensonge!", *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, 30 septembre 1885, p. 1.

⁷ Georges Suarez, *Briand. Sa vie, son œuvre, avec son journal et de nombreux documents inédits*, tome I : *Le Révolté circonspect 1862-1904*, Paris, Librairie Plon, 1938, p. 55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69-70; Gérard Unger, *Aristide Briand: le ferme conciliateur*, Paris, Fayard, 2005, p. 52.

¹¹ Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. I, p. 172, 174-9, 190-92.

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following year he became *secrétaire de rédaction*, and having assisted in the sale of the journal in 1896 he persuaded the new owner, Eugène Pereire, a nephew of the financier brothers, to be allowed to convert it into a socialist organ. As the *directeur*, he persuaded René Viviani to secure contributions from leading socialists including Jaurès, Pelletan, Millerand, Rouanet and Viviani himself, whose current outlets were usually *La Petite République* and *La Justice*. Briand occasionally contributed to *La Petite République* as well.¹²

In 1889 the main items listed under '*économie politique et finances*' in Briand's election platform had been the introduction of a progressive income tax and the application of the additional revenue to welfare services for the elderly poor.¹³ For the 1893 election he went far beyond this, the economic section of his platform including demands for the cancellation of all contracts that appropriated public property, the nationalisation of the *Banque de France*, the commercial banks, insurance companies and '*tous les fiefs de la féodalité capitaliste*', and for Paris the construction of a subway ('*métropolitain*') and the development the city's port facilities.¹⁴ He ran on a similar platform in the May 1897 legislative elections when he presented himself at Levallois-Clichy, and in 1902 when he ran in the first *circonscription* of Saint-Etienne as '*Avocat-publiciste, Secrétaire du Parti socialiste français, candidat de l'Union des Socialistes et des Républicains*'.¹⁵ On the latter occasion his platform included the nationalisation of the *Banque de France*, the railways and the mines.¹⁶ Successful at last, he entered parliament as a Socialist, and in 1904 he joined Lucien Herr, Léon Blum and Jean Jaurès in founding *L'Humanité*, which he co-edited and occasionally contributed to in the following year.¹⁷

On the face of it, Briand had completed his personal journey from political radicalism to full-fledged socialism. The most frequent theme of his early journalism, however, was to remain a constant for much of his public life: the need for the bourgeoisie to make timely concessions to the emerging working classes so as to head off the danger of uncontrollable demands for revolutionary change. The greatest danger to stability, he suggested, came not from the working classes or socialist agitators, but the avarice and blindness of the new financial élite who could not see that modest income redistribution and greater welfare spending would suffice to appease the emerging classes and strengthen the Republic. In 1892, the year he took up the cause of revolutionary syndicalism, this theme ceased for a time to find explicit expression, but even then his speeches and journalism continued to bear a similar, if differently expressed, message. He presented the general strike as the decisive weapon for bringing the capitalist system to its knees and replacing it with socialist relations of

¹² Georges Suarez, *ibid.*, t. 1, p. 151-4, 206, 218-219; Claude Bellanger, Jacques Godechot, Pierre Guiral et Fernand Terrou, *Histoire générale de la presse française*, tome III : *De 1871 à 1940*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1972, p. 364.

¹³ Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 1, p. 70-71.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174-175.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹⁶ 'Chronique électorale', *La Tribune républicaine*, 22 avril 1902, p. 3.

¹⁷ See for instance, Aristide Briand, 'Heureuse initiative', *L'Humanité*, 5 juillet 1904, p. 1, his first contribution, a call for balancing the rights of workers and the patronat.

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production. Yet he acknowledged that the great appeal of the general strike was that it kept dissident workers on the side of legality and diverted them from violent clashes with the forces of order. As he explained to workers at Trignac in August 1892, in his first public advocacy of a general strike, revolutions were the game of dupes. After three revolutions, in 1792, 1830 and 1848, he claimed, the workers of France were worse off than ever. The moral was clear: if they wished to improve their conditions and secure the fruits of their own labour, their only hope was through the peaceful, legal means of a co-ordinated general strike.

*Ce que vous n'avez pu obtenir par la persuasion, obtenez-le par la force - non pas la force violente par les barricades et le plomb - mais par la force légale. Si je puis m'exprimer ainsi, en vous croisant les bras!*¹⁸

He continually professed a belief in socialism, but his lack of interest in the problem of transforming the capitalist system into a socialist system and his constant emphasis upon the negative aspects of the general strike – '*c'est précisément le contraire de la révolution*', as he told the workers of Trignac – points strongly to the conclusion that his goal after 1892 as well as before was social stability through timely concessions to the working class. This in fact was the theme of his maiden speech in parliament in October 1902.¹⁹ It was also the central theme of his addresses on domestic affairs when 'normal' politics resumed after the Great War.²⁰ Despite labels such as *radical révisionniste*, *socialiste* and even *syndicaliste révolutionnaire*, and despite his provocative journalism, his *projet de société* still assumed the existence of a capitalist system. The role of the state would be extended, to enable a reduction in income inequalities and finance a rudimentary welfare state. Individual firms or sectors of the economy might be nationalised. State intervention might also be required to limit the impact of global market forces upon domestic wages and prices. But even if all this were carried out, the result would still be a lightly regulated form of capitalism.²¹

To understand why Briand remained essentially moderate in his political and economic choices in the first stage of his political life, it is instructive to consider his personal background as well as the general conditions of the region in which he lived for most of this time. Briand was born in Nantes in 1862, where his father was proprietor of a modest *débit de boissons*. So far as is known, it was a stable family which enjoyed a modest but increasing income. He attended the *Collège communal de Saint-Nazaire* between October 1875 and 1878 after his parents moved from Nantes to this thriving port. In February 1878 he enrolled as a *pensionnaire* at the *lycée de Nantes*, thanks to the support of the *principal* of the *Collège*, a free thinker

¹⁸ Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 1, p. 112. Briand adopted the same position when he crossed swords with Paul Lafargue the previous year, *ibid.*, p. 101.

¹⁹ Georges Suarez, *ibid.*, t. 1, p. 404-05.

²⁰ 'Au Congrès Républicain. Un superbe discours de M. Briand', *Le Phare de la Loire, de Bretagne et de Vendée*, 1^{er} novembre 1919, p. 2.

²¹ In the words of Maurice Agulhon, 'Voici Briand installé en archétype des socialistes devenus renégats par arrivisme et opportunisme. La suite montrera pourtant ce qu'il aura su conserver de son humanitarisme originel.' *La République*, t. 1, *L'élan fondateur et la grande blessure 1880-1932*, Paris, Hachette, 1990, p. 185.

who encouraged him to continue his studies and assisted him in obtaining a *bourse*. As at the *Collège*, the syllabus at the *lycée* was heavily weighted towards literature and languages, and, as before, Briand performed almost equally well in all his subjects including *le discours français, version latine, grec, vers latin, histoire* and *anglais*, thus earning a place near the top of his class.²² He owed his success in part to favourable local conditions, and partly to the Republic's support for education. While France as a whole experienced uneven economic conditions in the decade after the Franco-Prussian war, the French Atlantic ports and in particular Nantes and Saint-Nazaire enjoyed rapid growth. The *Collège de Saint-Nazaire* opened in 1875, the year that Briand enrolled. The *lycée* of Nantes was one of only seventy-five public *lycées* in the country. Completion of his *baccalauréat ès lettres* in 1881 placed him among the 2.4 per cent of the national population with a secondary education and provided his *entrée* into the expanding and relatively open *bourgeoisie* of lower Brittany.²³ This goes some way to explain his lifelong optimism and sympathy for the young Republic. As a young man he had several confrontations with members of the local establishment, but the blows incurred were usually mild and essentially self-inflicted. Thus in January 1886 he was challenged to a duel by the president of the Saint-Nazaire chamber of commerce, from which he emerged with a slight wound, and in July 1887 he was rejected on the one and only occasion when he sought membership of a masonic lodge. In both cases there is little doubt that he provoked hostility by his angry, occasionally inflammatory, journalism.²⁴ Nonetheless he had no difficulty finding employment with a local lawyer (*avoué*), saving enough to enter the *faculté de droit, place du Panthéon*, in 1883, where he obtained his *licence en droit* in September 1886. Less than two years later he became an elected councillor in Saint-Nazaire and represented the town in its competition with Nantes for development assistance from Paris.²⁵

In 1884 Briand met Fernand Pelloutier while returning from Paris to Saint-Nazaire in 1884. Four years younger than Briand and still a *lycéen* at the time of their first encounter, Pelloutier persuaded him to take up journalism and, according to most accounts, exercised a profound influence upon him for the next twenty years.²⁶ On the face of it, this seems to have been the case, since Briand soon turned from radical republicanism towards socialism and revolutionary syndicalism, the doctrine that Pelloutier developed into a national movement. It was while they were close friends that Briand became one of the leading advocates of the general strike as the chief weapon of socialist workers. He threw himself into the campaign for radical causes with great energy. Yet he had no time for political activists who advocated class conflict: on several occasions he openly took issue with Paul Lafargue largely for this

²² Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 1, p. 14-22; Bernard Oudin, *Aristide Briand. La paix: une idée neuve en Europe*, Paris, Éditions Robert Laffont, 1987, ch. 2.

²³ Roger Price, *A Social History of Nineteenth-Century France*, London, Hutchinson, 1987, p. 341-342.

²⁴ Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 1, p. 54; Gérard Unger, *Aristide Briand*, *op. cit.*, p. 44-6.

²⁵ Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 1, p. 57.

²⁶ See for instance, Georges Suarez, *ibid.*, t. 1, p. 48, 51-2; Bernard Oudin, *Aristide Briand*, *op. cit.*, p. 34-37. But see also Gérard Unger, *Aristide Briand*, p. 42, 48, 51, 84 *and passim*.

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reason.²⁷ Since his implicit aim was to strengthen the Republic by reconciling the peasants and workers to its institutions, he invariably preferred dialogue and compromise to confrontation and division. And since economic policy was never more than an instrument in this political quest, he remained prepared to alter his economic policies as and when the occasion required. In many respects his stance was closely akin to that of Jean Jaurès, who also sought to reconcile his vision of reformist socialism with an inclusive republic.

Exercising power at the national level, 1904-1914

In June 1903, barely more than a year after entering parliament, Briand became *rapporteur* of the parliamentary commission created to draft a bill for the separation of church and state. For the next two years he demonstrated remarkable perseverance and diplomatic skill in reconciling critics to the compromise bill. Although the minister, Emile Combes, was formally credited with its passage, Briand deserved most of the credit and gained the most from it in national standing. In March 1906, however, another separation occurred when Briand refused to break with the bourgeois coalition government and, as a result, was excluded from the Socialist party. Thereafter, while still calling himself a *socialiste indépendant*, he aligned himself with the *radicals*, including the former Socialists Millerand and Viviani as well as Bérenger, Caillaux, Clemenceau and Chéron, and in the winter of 1913-1914 he formed a new parliamentary group known as the *Fédération des gauches*, which included 126 *députés* and *sénateurs*. As a member of these political groups, he also became associated with their economic policies. The *ministre de l'Instruction publique, des Beaux-Arts et des Cultes* in the Sarrien government in 1906, he supported its proposals for a progressive income tax (*impôt sur le revenu*) and the guarantee to all workers of a weekly day of rest (*repos hebdomadaire*).²⁸ He occupied the same post in the first Clemenceau government and was *Garde des Sceaux* in Clemenceau's second government when it introduced bills for a progressive income tax and the nationalisation of the railways.

In March 1909, while still the *Garde des Sceaux*, Briand signalled his readiness to go beyond the government's reform policies at a *radical* meeting in the small Normandy town of Neubourg. Besides affirming the legitimacy of trade unions – a controversial stance while his own government repeatedly clashed with unionised workers – he proposed that they should become associated with the management of firms through the acquisition of shareholdings in them. This was a strikingly novel proposal since, as Marie-Geneviève Dézès observes, he '*affirme ... pour la première fois l'égalité des droits du travail et du capital. Une analyse de type marxiste se mêle ici à l'idéologie radical-socialiste du partage de la propriété économique.*'²⁹ In fact, Briand's interest

²⁷ Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 1, p. 98-100, 102, 384.

²⁸ Georges Bonnefous, *Histoire politique de la Troisième République*, tome I: *L'Avant-guerre (1906-1914)*, 2^e éd., Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1965, p. 22, 49.

²⁹ Marie-Geneviève Dézès, 'Participation et démocratie sociale: l'expérience Briand de 1909', *Le Mouvement social*, 87 (1974), p. 122.

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in the *principe de l'actionnariat collectif* was no mere flash in the pan. In late 1905 he had helped to found a *Comité de la démocratie sociale* with fellow activists, and in 1906 he had outlined his proposal to them.³⁰ In the year after his Neubourg address he repeatedly affirmed the need for economic reform of this order. Yet, on becoming Prime Minister for the first time in July 1909 he made no move to introduce the necessary legislation. And even at the end of his second government in February 1911, his most important economic reforms were a modest pension for workers and peasants, and the provision of credit for small-holders to purchase or improve their land.³¹ His ambition to go beyond capitalism or collectivism by means of workers' co-ownership of industry seemed to have been entirely forgotten.

The most controversial act of Briand's first government was, paradoxically, to break a national railway strike in October 1910 by calling up the *cheminots* for national service.³² He insisted upon safeguarding the essential services of the republic, but having done so he resumed his defence of workers' rights.³³ His vision, as well as the limits of his interest in change, appeared to be summed up in his declaration at the launch of the *Fédération des gauches* in January 1914. As he put it, the '*masses populaires*' had on more than one occasion saved the republic, and their contribution must not be forgotten or taken for granted. His *Fédération* colleagues would therefore continue the '*oeuvre de démocratie sociale*' begun twenty years earlier but still incomplete. They accepted that, like all other advanced industrial countries of Europe, the state had a role to play in the economy and social order of France, and they supported the introduction of a progressive income tax. But, he added, they also accepted that the state must live within its means and limit its expenditure to available revenue. So far from contemplating confiscatory taxes, they promised fiscal relief for small-holders – '*le dégrèvement de la terre*', as he put it – and to encourage wealth creation.³⁴ In short, they favoured some intervention in the operation of the labour market, some redistribution of income, the state provision of some welfare benefits, a state role in infrastructure development including ports and communications, state encouragement of intensive agriculture, industry and commerce, and in the case of the railways, which was presented as a case of market failure, direct ownership and management by the state; but they had no intention of fundamentally altering the economic system.

Briand still called himself a socialist.³⁵ But this evidently meant merely the provision of welfare benefits which, he indicated, must be limited by the need for investor confidence in the national finances and the prior claims of national defence. '*Le crédit*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

³¹ Édouard Bonnefous, *Histoire politique de la III^e République*, t. I, p. 38, 56-7, 191; Jacques Chastenet, *Histoire de la Troisième République*, t. 4 : *Jours inquiets et jours sanglants 1906-1918*, Paris, Librairie Hachette, 1957, p. 72; Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 2, ch. VI; 'Discours de M. Briand', *La Petite République*, 11 avril 1910, p. 1-2.

³² Jacques Chastenet, *Histoire de la Troisième République...*, *op. cit.*, t. 4, p. 77.

³³ Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 2, p. 455.

³⁴ 'Une organisation d'Union Républicaine a été créée hier soir', *La Petite République*, 27 décembre 1913, p. 1; 'Fédération des gauches a tenu hier soir son assemblée plénière', *ibid.*, 14 janvier 1914, p. 1.

³⁵ 'Le discours de M. Briand', *La Petite République*, 1^{er} avril 1914, p. 1.

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*de notre pays est un élément de sa force. Sa puissance militaire en est un autre.*³⁶ In short, the Republic came first; since radical economic reforms – in present circumstances at least – would divide the nation, they must therefore be ruled out.

What shaped Briand's choices during the second stage of his career? It is difficult to be sure in the absence of a more substantial documentary record, but some influences can at least be suggested. Upon separating from the Socialist party in 1906, he became associated with the loose coalition of radicals, radical socialists and independent socialists who formed the national governments in this period, and fell in with their economic reform proposals. As it happened, they were particularly interested in reform because, after a decade of anarchist violence, intense labour conflict and angry debates generated by the Dreyfus affair and the separation of church and state, they shared the popular mood in favour of a reduction in divisions within society. In particular, they looked for means of deproletarianising the working-class movement and integrating workers into the national community.³⁷ This, as we have seen, had already been Briand's aim for twenty years. His proposal for workers' co-ownership and *cogestion* of industry was only one of many proposals for resolving the confrontation between labour and capital at this time,³⁸ but it was wholly consistent with his long-standing aim.

It is not insignificant, either, that Briand continued to call himself an independent socialist. He may have done so for electoral reasons, since the first *circonscription* of Saint-Etienne which he represented was largely working class.³⁹ Nonetheless from 1906 he faced constant attack from his former Socialist comrades, for whom he was now a renegade or traitor.⁴⁰ Yet instead of reacting against these attacks by denouncing their policies, he sought to justify his own socialist credentials.

As the central figure in the lengthy parliamentary debates on the *loi de séparation*, Briand attracted the interest of *le beau monde* and was soon invited to their *salons* and *soirées*. In 1905 Anatole France introduced him to his mistress, Mme Arman de Caillavet, whose *salon*, avenue Hoche, regularly drew leading progressive intellectuals and politicians including Clemenceau, Jaurès and Blum.⁴¹ In the next few years Briand also frequented the *soirées* organised by the *comédienne* Cécile Sorel, the *salons* of Mme Caillavet and la comtesse Greffuelhe, the latter 'très à droite', and hunted as a guest of *comte* Félix-Nicolas Potocki. From 1911 he attended *soirées* at Henri Robert's, one of the 'ténors du barreau', and the *salon*, avenue Wagram, of Mme Bulteau, a prominent woman of letters whose regular guests included literary and artistic luminaries such as Maurice Barrès, Henri de Regnier, Alfred Capus, the painters Blanche and Forain, and the poetess Anna de Noailles. It

³⁶ 'Fédération des gauches a tenu hier soir son assemblée plénière', *ibid.*, 14 janvier 1914, p. 1. See also 'L'Appel au pays de la Fédération des gauches', *L'Écho de Paris*, 12 avril 1914, p. 2.

³⁷ Julian Wright, 'Social Reform, State Reform, and Aristide Briand's Moment of Hope in France, 1909-1910', *French Historical Studies*, 28 (Winter 2005), p. 42.

³⁸ Marie-Geneviève Dèzès, 'Participation et démocratie sociale', *op. cit.*, p. 121.

³⁹ Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 2, p. 103; *L'Écho de Paris*, 25 avril 1910, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Arnaud Teyssier, *La III^e République*, tome 2: 1895-1919, de Félix Faure à Clemenceau, Paris, Pygmalion/Gérard Watelet, 2001, p. 207, 221-2, 276-7, 279.

⁴¹ Gérard Unger, *Aristide Briand...*, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

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was at the home of the *marquise* de Ganay à Courances in 1913 that he met the *princesse* Marie Bonaparte, another of his mistresses.⁴² As Gabriel Hanotaux noted, Briand became '*très recherché des duchesses*'.⁴³ Yet wealth and possessions held little appeal to him. He preferred to live simply and kept his personal expenses within his parliamentary income. From his own savings he purchased a small property at Cocherel, near Pacy-sur-Eure, in the spring of 1914, and returned to it whenever possible.⁴⁴ The attention and flattery of high society appears to have had little effect upon him. Probably, at most, it reinforced his view that divisions in society could be and should be bridged through moderate reform.

From 1913 and possibly earlier, Briand also regularly attended the *déjeuners du mercredi* organised by Gustave Le Bon, the social psychologist and *savant*. The twenty to thirty guests included leading lawyers, politicians, senior functionaries, all of whom were drawn from economic ministries, and a large contingent of bankers and industrialists. Le Bon himself chose the topics for discussion, which ranged widely. However, his constant preoccupation, it seems, was the civilising of society through educational reform. The industrialists, practically all of them graduates of the *grandes écoles* and most of them associated with the new sectors of the 'second industrialisation', were evidently also interested in social reform. In contrast to the older generation of industrialists, who were chiefly interested in the supply of cheap and docile labour, they needed large, stable and prosperous markets and an educated workforce. Briand, it seems, made no attempt to dominate conversations at these meetings and instead chose to listen to other guests. While it is impossible to know what he gained from them, his encounters with Le Bon and progressive members of the business community may well have reinforced his appreciation of the republic.⁴⁵

Briand, despite growing up in Atlantic seaports, scarcely ever set foot outside France or included foreigners among his friends. Yet his approach to society and economic issues bore a strong resemblance to that of the Fabian socialists in England in this period. They were by no means the same. Fabians moved in a different direction from Briand, towards collectivism and eventually joining the Labour party. Yet they shared his concern about the dangers of social conflict and accepted the 'civilising mission' of the middle class. They also rejected both liberal individualism and doctrinaire socialism, and emphasised the need to proceed cautiously and to seek to persuade élite society of the need for reform.⁴⁶ Briand, though far more at home with the working class and confident of its good will than the leading Fabians, broadly shared their means and their ends. He was, it seems, prepared to contemplate a range of social and economic reforms, but not at the expense of social division. Indeed, he was

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 286.

⁴³ Gabriel Hanotaux, *Carnets (1907-1925)*, eds. Georges Dethan, Georges-Henri Soutou and Marie-Renée Mouton, Paris, Éditions A. Pedone, 1982, p. 201.

⁴⁴ Gérard Unger, *Aristide Briand...*, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

⁴⁵ Benoît Marpeau, 'Capitalisme et "psychologie de l'éducation": Gustave Le Bon et les milieux d'affaires au début du XX^e siècle', *Le Mouvement social*, n° 191 (avril-juin 2000), p. 7-8, 11 *and passim*; Gabriel Hanotaux, *Carnets*, *op. cit.*, p. 200-201; Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 2, p. 439.

⁴⁶ Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, *The First Fabians*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977, p. 81-82, 115-116 *and passim*.

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convinced that aggressive or doctrinal actions were self-defeating. As he put it himself, *'tout progrès prématuré est un progrès mort.'* This, rather than a lack of commitment, is probably why he did not pursue his visionary notion of transcending capitalism and collectivism, and retreated to piecemeal reforms.⁴⁷

From 1902 to 1919 Briand represented an industrial district of Saint-Etienne in the *département* of the Loire, then for the following thirteen years he represented the more mixed first *circonscription* of the Loire Inférieure including Nantes. Yet he seldom if ever mentioned local interests in parliament or in major speeches elsewhere. Nor does he appear to have altered his views on commercial policy, despite the different interests of the upper and lower Loire. He remained a moderate reformer, sceptical of fixed rules or laws of economics, and was neither a free trader nor a zealous protectionist.⁴⁸ In the absence of more specific influences, one returns to the original springs of his political action: his attachment to the Republic and his belief in the possibility of reconciling the working classes to its institutions. It is this above all that appears to have shaped his economic assumptions during the second stage of his career and his continued support for moderate economic reform such as the introduction of state pensions and a progressive income tax.

Exercising power at the international level, 1914-1932

In August 1914 Briand again became Garde des Sceaux in the Viviani government, and in October 1915 he formed his fifth government, which lasted until March 1917. This was an exceptionally difficult time for France on account of the battle of Verdun, which began on 21 February 1916 and continued until late December at a cost of at least 162,000 French troops killed and as many more wounded or missing. This was also an important time from an economic standpoint, since the government sought to extend its control over resources and prices. Briand brought the technocrat Louis Loucheur into the government to expand the production of munitions, and held an inter-allied conference in Paris with the aim of prolonging economic co-operation into the post-war period. After the war, when Briand returned to office, economic problems influenced and often dominated domestic and foreign policy-making. As in the earlier stages of his career, however, his role in this third stage is difficult to define precisely, since no record was normally kept of cabinet meetings,⁴⁹ he wrote almost nothing, and his closest collaborators, the diplomats Philippe Berthelot and Alexis Léger and his colleague Loucheur, were also exceptionally discreet.⁵⁰ Economic policy often involved the *Banque de France* as well as the ministries of

⁴⁷ Marie-Geneviève Dèzès, 'Participation et démocratie sociale', *op. cit.*, p. 123-124.

⁴⁸ On his view of trade policy, see for instance, Aristide Briand, 'Un beau mensonge!', *La Démocratie de l'Ouest*, 30 septembre 1885, p. 1; Aristide Briand, 'Heureuse initiative', *L'Humanité*, 5 juillet 1904, p. 1.

⁴⁹ The private notes of one minister are summarised in Guy Rousseau, 'Le Conseil des ministres en 1916: d'après les notes d'Étienne Clémentel', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, vol. 43, no.171 (July 1993), p. 139-160.

⁵⁰ Gabriel Hanotaux. *Carnets*, *op. cit.*, p. 202; Pierre-Etienne Flandin, *Politique française 1919-1940*, Paris, Les Éditions Nouvelles, 1947, p. 41; Lord Hardinge, *Old Diplomacy*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1947, p. 254; Lord Riddell, *Intimate Diary of the Peace Conference and After, 1918-1923*, London, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1933, p. 277.

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commerce, finance, agriculture and foreign affairs. Despite France's reputation as a strong state, however, these institutions seldom collaborated effectively in the inter-war years.⁵¹ As a result it is far from clear what role Briand played in policy-making and whether he initiated policies or simply yielded to his expert advisers. All the same, there is little doubt that he quickly settled upon broad strategic goals, and remained prepared to subordinate economic decisions to them. This is indicated by the fact that from 1921 when he became *président du conseil* for the seventh time, he insisted upon retaining control of the ministry of foreign affairs.

In January 1921 France faced acute economic problems arising from the reconversion of industry to peace-time production, the costly reconstruction of ten northern *départements*, and the burden of servicing the vastly increased national debt, all at a time when foreign markets were dislocated and the international economy was depressed. Briand's ministerial statement to the Chamber of Deputies on 20 January 1921⁵² largely repeated the promises set out in his statement before the general election in November 1919.⁵³ These included the rapid dismantling of price controls and other market regulations, the reduction of public expenditure and the maintenance of some safeguards for labour, and differed little from the promises of the centrist majority in parliament. However, Briand also soon faced a challenge to the peace settlement when an international conference met in Paris to consider Germany's non-payment of reparations. He was aware of the sensitivity of the parliament, the press and the public to any signs of weakness in the defence of French interests vis-à-vis Germany.⁵⁴ But he had been out of office at the time that Clemenceau negotiated the Versailles Treaty, which enabled him to deny responsibility for its weaknesses. Almost immediately he began negotiations with France's former allies to secure a workable compromise.

At the international conference Briand found David Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, impatient for a settlement of reparation demands in order to end the uncertainty that was causing turmoil in Germany.⁵⁵ Briand agreed to expert conversations on Germany's capacity to pay. He also proposed the introduction of a

⁵¹ France, Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Papiers privés, agents particuliers (hereafter MAE, PA-AP) 261-Seydoux, 38, note Seydoux, ca. 18 juin 1926; France, MAE, PA-AP 261-Seydoux, 39, Seydoux lettre personnelle à de Fleuriau, 11 octobre 1926; France, MAE, PA-AP 261-Seydoux, 39, de Fleuriau lettre personnelle à Seydoux, 11 février 1928 France, MAE Relations Comm'les, B-Negocns comm'les, 2, 'Projet de circulaire', 1 décembre 1929; France, MAE, PA-AP 166, Papiers Tardieu, 527, de Laboulaye pour Briand au Président du conseil et le Ministre de l'Intérieur (Sous-secrétariat de l'Économie nationale), no. 302, 12 avril 1930. On the rosy view from London of France's management of external relations, see Robert Boyce, 'Business as usual: The limits of French economic diplomacy, 1926-1933', in Robert Boyce (ed.), *French Foreign and Defence Policy, 1918-1940: The Decline and Fall of a Great Power*, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 107-131.

⁵² Achille Elisha (ed.), *Aristide Briand. Discours et écrits de politique étrangère*, Paris, Librairie Plon, 1965, p. 49-50.

⁵³ 'Élections législatives du 16 novembre: Première circonscription de la Loire Inférieure, Union des Républicains', *Le Phare de la Loire, de Bretagne et de Vendée*, 5 novembre 1919, p. 1; 'Chronique locale: Notre programme', *ibid.*, 7 novembre 1919, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 5, p. 110.

⁵⁵ Sir C. E. Callwell, *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: His Life and Diaries*, vol. II, London, Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1927, p. 278.

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tax on German exports alongside a fixed annuity, to allow reparation payments to be kept within Germany's capacity to pay and give reparation creditors an interest in the recovery of Germany's trade.⁵⁶ Unyielding German resistance to reparation payments led to a new crisis and Franco-British agreement to occupy the cities of Düsseldorf, Duisburg and Ruhrort, which ended the chance of a settlement on this basis. In the summer of 1921, however, Briand again showed his willingness to compromise by supporting direct Franco-German negotiations on the provision of large-scale reparations in kind. As Jacques Bariéty writes,

La documentation ne permet pas de préciser le rôle personnel de Briand, s'il en a eu un, dans la négociation. Encore que les questions techniques l'ennuient prodigieusement, il n'est pas pensable qu'il n'ait pas été tenu au courant par Loucheur des grandes lignes de la négociation; et il les a certainement approuvées, puisqu'il a laissé Loucheur poursuivre et conclure.⁵⁷

This resulted in the Wiesbaden agreements, signed on 6 October 1921 by Walther Rathenau for Germany and Loucheur, now minister for the liberated regions and reparations.

By the terms of the agreement, Germany would create an autonomous organisation to receive orders for up to 7 billion gold marks in goods and services, for use in the reconstruction of the devastated regions of northern France. The orders would be filled by German firms, which would receive payment not from the French purchasing agency but the German government, which in turn would deduct the payments from its reparation bill. This was an ambitious but essentially realistic scheme which, if implemented, might have produced a virtuous circle in Franco-German political and economic relations.⁵⁸ It was blocked by opposition from French industrialists who objected to what they regarded as a form of subsidy to their German competitors, and from London which regarded it as a threat to Britain's export trade and therefore delayed its approval by the Reparations Commission until after the fall of the Briand government. Nevertheless, in January 1922 Briand again demonstrated his readiness for compromise at the conference at Cannes, when, at British insistence, he agreed to a temporary moratorium on German reparation payments in return for certain guarantees that Germany would not repudiate its Treaty obligations. This initiative was cut short when Alexandre Millerand, the president of the *République*, encouraged a rebellion within the cabinet, obliging Briand to return to Paris in order to defend his policy.⁵⁹

Why did Briand doggedly pursue a compromise on German reparation payments? Conservative critics such as Millerand, André Tardieu and the diplomat Saint-Aulaire

⁵⁶ Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 5, p. 135-136.

⁵⁷ J. Bariéty, *Les Relations franco-allemandes après la Première Guerre mondiale*, Paris, Éditions Pédone, 1977, p. 84.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 84-85.

⁵⁹ Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 5, p. 352-430; Auguste Félix Charles de Beaupoil, Comte de Saint-Aulaire, *Confession d'un vieux diplomate*, Paris, Flammarion, 1953, p. 588-592; Elisha (ed.), *Aristide Briand*, *op. cit.*, p. 131-140; Stéphane Lauzanne, 'Retour brusqué de M. Briand', *Le Matin*, 12 janvier 1922, p. 1; 'Le Ministère Briand est démissionnaire', *ibid.*, 13 janvier 1921, p. 1.

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claimed he was weak and excessively pro-British.⁶⁰ But the explanation is both more interesting and more substantial. As *président du Conseil* during the darkest months of the war, Briand had been made keenly aware that France could not resist German aggression without the support of Allies and in particular Britain. Applying this lesson after the war, he continually sought to avoid a rupture with Britain while attempting to convert their loose *entente* into a firm alliance. This evidently also led him to appreciate the inter-locking character of international economic relations. France could not act alone and prosper while other major countries were destabilised and impoverished. In economic as well as political relations, therefore, France's interest lay in collaboration with other Powers, including former enemies as well as former allies. The war thus altered Briand's outlook on economic policy by underlining France's vulnerability and the vital need for multilateral solutions on both the economic and political fronts. Unfortunately for him, other French political leaders were not ready for the necessary compromises. Briand realised this after leaving Cannes to justify his policy in Paris, choosing not to demand a vote of confidence from the *Chambre de députés*, but instead resigning to make way for Raymond Poincaré to form a new government. From the outset, Briand appears to have been confident that Poincaré's policy of unilateral defence of French treaty rights would eventually fail. He was content to wait for this to happen, anticipating that he would then have another and perhaps better chance to pursue his multilateral strategy.⁶¹

Briand returned to office in 1925, forming ephemeral governments in the spring of 1926 and again in 1929 but remaining foreign minister continuously from 1925 until January 1932. His best-known act in this period was to negotiate the Rhineland pact, the keystone of the Locarno agreements in 1925, which nominally guaranteed Belgium, Germany and France from invasion through the Rhineland.⁶² But he also shared with Loucheur the credit for persuading the League of Nations in September 1925 to sponsor a World Economic Conference.⁶³ The conference, held in Geneva in May 1927, proved to be essentially a European affair since every European country including the Soviet Union sent a delegation, while only a handful of non-European countries chose to do so. Since it was a semi-official function, Briand did not attend, but he evidently welcomed it on the assumption that the expansion of trade would favour European prosperity and in turn stability and peace. This was the

⁶⁰ See for instance, Saint-Aulaire, *Confession d'un vieux diplomate*, *op. cit.*, p. 553, 570, 582-584; also Christian Delporte, *La III^e République: Vol. 3: 1919-1940, de Raymond Poincaré à Paul Reynaud*, Paris, Pygmalion/Gérard Watelet, 1998, p. 65.

⁶¹ Georges Suarez, *Briand...*, *op. cit.*, t. 5, p. 425.

⁶² Christophe Bellon, *Briand L'Européen*, Paris, La Documentation française, 2009, p. 92, credits Briand with initiating the Rhineland pact negotiated at Locarno in October 1925. In fact, Lord D'Abernon, the British ambassador in Berlin, was responsible for initiating it: Robert Boyce, *The Great Interwar Crisis and the Collapse of Globalization*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 134.

⁶³ France, MAE Société des Nations, Secrétariat Général IJ-QEF, 1194, Massigli memorandum, 11 septembre 1925; League of Nations *Official Journal*, 6th Assembly, 1925, p. 81; On the international background to this initiative, see Robert Boyce, *British Capitalism at the Crossroads, 1919-1932: A Study in Politics, Economics, and International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 110-119.

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view of his advisers at the Quai d'Orsay including Jacques Seydoux, who remained the most respected authority on politico-economic issues even after his retirement on grounds of ill-health in December 1926.⁶⁴ It was also consistent with Briand's assumption about interdependence, wherein French security would be strengthened by increasing the mutual dependence of France and its neighbours, and especially through increased commercial relations.

In October 1927 Briand authorised the Quai d'Orsay to support the first League-sponsored prohibitions conference, which sought to eliminate quantitative trade controls on trade, including embargoes, quotas and other rationing schemes. When the initiative required a second and third conference, Briand saw to it that the Quai d'Orsay continued its active support.⁶⁵ In September 1929 he also associated France with the British-Belgian proposal for a two-year tariff truce, which was intended to provide the confidence for a new attempt at multilateral trade liberalisation.⁶⁶ But by then it had proved impossible to make progress at the international level, largely because nearly all countries were linked through the unconditional most-favoured-nation principle, and the Anglo-Saxon powers, while insistent upon receiving the benefits of trade liberalisation elsewhere, were unwilling make any contributions of their own. This reinforced Briand's decision to turn towards economic initiatives limited to Europe.

One approach championed by Loucheur since 1925 was the negotiation of industrial cartels or *ententes*. The assumption was that agreement among leading firms in an industrial sector on market shares would create market stability. This would make it possible to attract extra investment and tend to concentrate production in larger firms with higher productivity. It would also largely do away with the need for trade barriers.⁶⁷ Briand appears to have relied upon Loucheur for economic advice and supported his vision of a *Europe des producteurs*.⁶⁸ At the 1927 World Economic Conference, however, Loucheur's proposal for industrial *ententes* encountered strong

⁶⁴ France, MAE PA-AP 261-Seydoux 32, 'Note: Situation de l'industrie allemande. Visite de M. Mayrisch', 27 février 1925; France, MAE PA-AP 261-Seydoux 32, 'Visite de M. Benes à M. Seydoux - Autriche', 16 mars 1925.

⁶⁵ France leaned on Britain and the Little Entente countries to make the necessary concessions for an agreement: France, MAE Série Y Internationale 1918-1940, vol. 629, Beaumarchais à de Fleuriau, télégramme no. 825-7 'urgent', 30 octobre 1927; France, MAE Série Y Internationale 1918-1940, vol. 630, Henry Gueyraud (pour Serruys) télégramme no. 1, 'très urgent', 5 juillet 1928; France, MAE Série Y Internationale 1918-1940, vol. 630, Massigli télégramme no. 28, 5 juillet 1928 France, MAE Série Y Internationale 1918-1940, vol. 1398, Briand à Serruys, 5 avril 1929.

⁶⁶ France, MAE SDN IJ-Questions Economiques et Financières 1172, Compte rendu de la Réunion interministérielle du 15 novembre 1929.

⁶⁷ Stephen D. Carls, *Louis Loucheur and the Shaping of Modern France, 1916-1931*, Baton Rouge and London, Louisiana State University Press, 1993, p. 264, 268; Robert Boyce, *British Capitalism at the Crossroads, op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁶⁸ France, MAE, Société des Nations 1195, Briand lettre à Jouhaux, Serruys et Henri de Peyerimhoff, 21 avril 1926. See also his defence of the Locarno agreements before the Chambre des députés on 25 February 1926 where he spoke of the need to end the anarchy of production in Europe, Elisha (ed), *Aristide Briand, op. cit.*, p. 169.

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opposition from delegates worried about commercial freedom and consumer interests, and failed to receive endorsement from the gathering.⁶⁹

An alternative approach, which attracted increasing support after the World Economic Conference, involved the modification of the most-favoured-nation principle to allow countries to make exceptions for plurilateral (*i.e.* multilateral) agreements among countries committed to lowering trade barriers on an equitable basis. After lengthy consideration by the League of Nations Economic Committee in 1927-1928, this approach was endorsed by several countries including Switzerland and Belgium, and Briand evidently agreed that France should also approve it in principle.⁷⁰ This was consistent with his growing interest in the European movement. In 1925 Briand encouraged the formation of the *Comité franco-allemand d'information et de documentation*, an informal body of industrialists as well as several prominent journalists and academics from Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and France, under the chairmanship of the Luxembourg steel magnate, Emile Mayrisch. Ostensibly the *Comité* was an independent organisation, dedicated to the promotion of European economic integration; Mayrisch himself soon became the president of the new-created *Entente européenne d'acier*. Behind the scenes, however, the Quai d'Orsay remained in direct contact with Mayrisch and assisted his promotion of the committee.⁷¹ Briand also encouraged the *Comité d'Action économique et douanière*. For several years he refused approaches from Count Coudenhove-Kalergi's Pan-Europa movement or the *Union douanière européenne*, suspecting both of them of being stalking horses for a resurrected German-dominated *Mitteleuropa*.⁷² But in 1927 he set aside his reservations and lent his name to both associations, helping them to form strong French branches to ensure that they would properly reflect French views in its project for European integration.⁷³ Two months after becoming *président du Conseil* for the tenth time in July 1929 he went further by announcing at the League of Nations Assembly his support for the federation of Europe. Speaking to the Assembly he kept to broad generalities, but indicated that economic integration was central to his plan. 'Obviously,' he said, the federation

⁶⁹ League of Nations, *Report and Proceedings of the World Economic Conference held at Geneva, May 4th to 23rd, 1927*, L.N.II.52.2 (Geneva, 1927), p. 147-151; Robert Boyce, *British Capitalism at the Crossroads*, *op. cit.*, p. 119-122.

⁷⁰ France, MAE Série Y Internationale 1918-1940, vol. 1398, Briand à Serruys, 5 avril 1929.

⁷¹ Contacts between the Quai d'Orsay and Mayrisch began in 1922 and intensified in 1925-1926 when the Mayrisch committee was being formed. As a reward for his services, Seydoux recommended that Mayrisch should be made a commander of the *Légion d'Honneur*: France, MAE, PA-AP 261, Seydoux 25, Note G. no. 2, Visite de M. Mayrisch, 13 avril 1922; France, MAE PA-AP 261, Seydoux 1, 'Note: Situation de l'industrie allemande. Visite de M. Mayrisch, Paris 27 février 1925'; France, MAE PA-AP 261-Seydoux 41, Seydoux à de Margerie, sans date (ca.3 juin 1926); France, MAE PA-AP 261, Seydoux 42, Seydoux to M. Carbonnel, Ministre de France à Luxembourg, 8 novembre 1926; Bernard Auffray, *Pierre de Margerie (1861 - 1942) et la vie diplomatique de son temps* (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1976), p. 496.

⁷² France, MAE Relations Commerciales. B-Informations économiques 30, M. Elbel, directeur du Comité d'Action économique et douanière, à M. de Saintquentin, 9 avril 1926; France, MAE PA-AP 261 Papiers Seydoux 43, Seydoux à Léger, 2 mai 1928.

⁷³ France, MAE Relations Commerciales. B-Informations économiques 30, Briand à Le Troquer, 6 mai 1927; France, MAE PA-AP 261, Papiers Seydoux 43, Seydoux à Léger, 2 mai 1928.

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would be 'primarily economic, for that is the most urgent aspect of the question.'⁷⁴ His memorandum of 1 May 1930, which he circulated to interested governments, was somewhat more specific, affirming that the economic aim was *inter alia* a European customs union, but it gave no indication of the expected timetable or procedure. More remarkably, Briand now asserted that Europe's security arrangements must come before economic integration.⁷⁵

What were Briand's motives for promoting European federation, and why did he downplay the economic objective when the plan came to be circulated? As is well known, the idea of European integration had been in the air since the mid-1920s, when numerous authorities in France and elsewhere asserted the need for action. The advent of the large corporation and the introduction of mass production techniques to manufacturing were transforming the United States into an industrial colossus, while the Soviet Union under the New Economic Plan was widely expected to become a similarly vast industrial power. In these circumstances it became a commonplace to say that unless Europe reversed its 'balkanisation' and merged its markets into a single area large enough to allow the scale economies of modern industry, it would be crushed between its more powerful capitalist and Communist rivals. Jules Laroche, a senior diplomat and long-time collaborator, claims that as early as the conference at Cannes in January 1922 Briand privately told colleagues,

*Nous nous trouverons un jour enserrés entre deux colosses, la Russie et les États-Unis. C'est pourquoi il faut faire les États-Unis d'Europe, au moins dans le domaine économique.*⁷⁶

According to one account, Briand evoked this spectre when he met Gustav Stresemann at Thoiry on 17 September 1926.⁷⁷ Neither the German or French record of the meeting mention it, but Stresemann later stated that 'this idea of European co-operation, based on an economic understanding between Germany and France, runs like a red thread through all [his] dealings with [Briand].'⁷⁸

In July 1929 Briand expressed his intention to speak on European federation at Geneva shortly after learning that the United States intended to raise its already exceptionally high tariff wall. As he explained to the press, it was time to build upon the framework of peace created by the Locarno treaties, to apply the lessons the America's economic success, and to equip Europe to face the consequences of

⁷⁴ League of Nations *Official Record*, Records of the Tenth Assembly, Plenary Meetings, 1929, p. 52.

⁷⁵ 'Mémoire sur l'organisation d'un régime d'Union fédérale européenne', Antoine Fleury (ed.), *Le Plan Briand d'Union fédérale européenne*, Annexe I, p. 569-82.

⁷⁶ Jules Laroche, *Au Quai d'Orsay avec Briand and Poincaré 1913-1926*, Paris, 1957, p. 101f.

⁷⁷ According to Antonina Vallentin, Briand's parting words were, 'If we do not hold together we shall be eaten up by foreign capital. ...Well, it is lucky we agree; if we did not, the American bankers would pull our shirts off our backs.' *Stresemann*, trans. Eric Sutton, London, Constable & Co, 1931, p. 232, also 227, 229. But see France, MAE, PA-AP-261, Papiers Seydoux 2, Entretien de Thoiry', Très confidentiel, 'M. Seydoux: notes par M. Hesnard, revus par M. Briand', 13 novembre 1926; *Gustav Stresemann: His Diaries, Letters and Papers*, Vol. 3, ed. and trans. Eric Sutton, London, MacMillan and Co., 1940, p. 17-27 and passim.

⁷⁸ *Gustav Stresemann: His Diaries, Letters and Papers*, vol. 3, p. 420.

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America's commercial policy.⁷⁹ Just about this time he described plurilateral agreements in Europe *'comme une arme éventuelle contre le protectionisme des États-Unis'*.⁸⁰ It was evidently this motive, together with fear that France was losing its influence over Germany that led him to take his initiative. Seydoux had constantly warned him that Germany would make a new bid to dominate the Continent in the absence of constraints upon its growing economic power.⁸¹ And in the summer of 1929 France was about to accept the Young Plan, which promised a final settlement of the reparations issue, but also an early withdrawal of the remaining Allied troops from the Rhineland. It seemed reasonable to anticipate that other European countries, while divided on other issues, might be drawn together by their fear of hostile global forces, and in particular the economic threat posed by Russia and America. If so, this would provide a new means of containing Germany.

What then of Briand's decision to subordinate European economic integration to security arrangements in his memorandum of May 1930? Not only are there precious few papers relating to the preparation of the memorandum; there are no reports of interviews or meetings with him at this time. Although the absence of documentation makes it impossible to establish his motives with any precision, it is likely that one factor was growing pressure for trade protection within France from agricultural and industrial interests.⁸² Another may have been the longstanding uncertainty among officials about departing from the most-favoured-nation principle, and their fear of a German-dominated *Mittleuropa*.⁸³ A third was almost certainly reports of hostility from Britain.⁸⁴ Since Briand was acutely interested in Britain's goodwill, this was almost bound to affect his decision, although even here one cannot be sure. The change in priority from economics to security is evident from the first draft of the

⁷⁹ *L'Œuvre*, 11 juillet 1929, p. 1.

⁸⁰ France, MAE Série Y Internationale 1918-1940, 1398, Briand à Serruys, 5 avril 1929.

⁸¹ France, MAE PA-AP 261, Seydoux 32, Note: Situation de l'industrie allemand. Visite de M. Mayrisch', 27 février 1925; France, MAE PA-AP 261, Seydoux 32, Note: Danger de la concurrence industrielle allemande, 4 mars 1925; France, MAE PA-AP 261, Seydoux 37, Seydoux à Herbette (Moscou), 8 juillet 1925; France, MAE, PA-AP 261, Seydoux 41, Seydoux to Herbette, 27 mai 1926; France, MAE, Europe 1918-1940, Grande-Bretagne 89, Note Seydoux, 15 juin 1926; France, MAE PA-AP 261, Seydoux 42, Seydoux à Herbette, 2 décembre 1926; France, MAE, PA-AP 261, Papiers Seydoux, 38, Seydoux personnel à de Fleuriau, 19 mars 1928.

⁸² France, MAE Papiers 1940, Papiers Léger 3, Louis Renault à Léger, 31 août 1929; France, MAE Papiers 1940, Papiers Léger 3, Massigli note pour le Ministre, trêve douanière, 16 octobre [novembre] 1929; France, MAE Papiers 1940, Papiers Léger 3, Massigli note pour le Ministre, 23 novembre 1929; France, MAE SDN IJ-Questions Economiques et Financières 1428, Jean Hennessy (Ministre de l'Agriculture) à Briand, no. 4679, 20 novembre 1929; France, MAE SDN IJ-Questions Economiques et Financières 1428, Seydoux note pour le Ministre, 23 novembre 1929; France, MAE Société des Nations, IJ-QEF 1429, Compte rendu de la Commission interministérielle du 21 décembre 1929' (par François Seydoux).

⁸³ France, MAE Société des Nations IJ-Questions Economiques et Financières 1172, Projet de compte rendu de la Réunion interministérielle du 22 mars 1929 au sujet de la 28^e session du Comité économique.

⁸⁴ Robert Boyce, 'Britain's first "No" to Europe: Britain and the Briand Plan, 1929-1930', *European Studies Review*, vol. 10 (1980), p. 17-45; France, MAE Série Y Internationale 1918-1940, Massigli (fil direct) no. 136, 18 septembre 1929 et Massigli (fil direct) no. 157, 20 septembre 1929.

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memorandum,⁸⁵ and the only explanation anywhere in the documentation comes from a colleague of Briand's who remarked that the failure of so many economic conferences since the war pointed to the impossibility of economic reforms until states felt secure enough to relax their protectionist policies.⁸⁶

What is certain is that the change in priority disappointed Briand's supporters and pleased his opponents. Nationalists in Germany, Italy, Britain and elsewhere claimed that once again imperialist France sought to impose its hegemony on Europe as the price of economic co-operation or integration.⁸⁷ Briand pretended to be encouraged by the polite but evasive responses to his memorandum, but privately threatened to wash his hands of it before being persuaded to chair the League Committee on European Economic Union (CEUE).⁸⁸ Yet it is far from clear whether he himself understood the consequences of demoting economic integration to second place in his own scheme or the potential importance of promoting European economic integration through the CEUE. One is left with the impression that he was pleased to be regarded as a visionary and prepared to innovate at the macro-economic level, but was never clear as to how economic integration might be achieved.

Briand remained responsible for French foreign policy-making for almost two years after the circulation of his memorandum, and was involved in major initiatives including the CEUE, the preparation of a French alternative to the Austro-German customs union scheme, negotiations on the Hoover inter-governmental debt moratorium, and France's extension of financial assistance to Austria, Germany and Britain. As before, he regularly showed a preference for multilateralism over bilateralism or economic nationalism, and appeared more liberal than colleagues such as Pierre Laval, Pierre-Etienne Flandin or André Tardieu. But he did not depart radically from them on his basic assumptions about the working of the domestic or international economy. Thus, for instance, he shared their view that the enormous accumulation of gold by the *Banque de France* after 1928 was both natural and essentially desirable.⁸⁹ As late as November 1930 he shared the common misconception that France was largely immune from the world crisis because its economy had a healthier balance of agriculture and industry than 'over-industrialised' countries such as Germany or the United States.⁹⁰

But after September 1929 and the onset of the world slump, he appears to have declined physically and lacked the energy – or vision – to influence the direction of French policy. Despite the desperate need for action, the CEUE had practically no

⁸⁵ France, MAE Papiers 1940 Papiers Léger 3, first three drafts of 'Memorandum sur l'organisation d'un régime d'Union Fédérale Européenne'.

⁸⁶ France, MAE Papiers 1940 Papiers Tardieu 522, Louis Aubert personnel to Tardieu, 17 May 1930.

⁸⁷ C.-J. Gignoux, 'Le mémorandum sur l'Union européenne', *La Journée industrielle*, 20 May 1930, p. 1; Bertrand de Jouvenel, *D'une Guerre à l'autre*, t. 2 : *La décomposition de l'Europe libérale (Octobre 1925 – Janvier 1932)*, Paris, Librairie Plon, 1941, p. 311.

⁸⁸ Britain, Public Record Office, Foreign Office (hereafter PRO, FO), 371/14984, W9214/451/98, Pattenon no. 45LN, containing Cadogan to Foreign Office, 9 September 1930.

⁸⁹ Briand referred to 'les lois monétaires' determining the gold movements: France, MAE, Y International, 251, Note de Briand à Laval, no. 266, 22 octobre 1930.

⁹⁰ Bertrand de Jouvenel, *D'une Guerre à l'autre*, *op. cit.*, t. 2, p. 329.

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answer to Europe's economic crisis.⁹¹ When a French alternative to the Austro-German customs union scheme was required in the spring of 1931, it was André François-Poncet, the under-secretary of state for national industry, who seized the opportunity to draft a '*plan constructif*'. Pierre Flandin, the *ministre des Finances*, dominated internal discussions as well as using the financial attachés to communicate it to the interested foreign governments. Neither Briand nor the Quai d'Orsay played an important part in the ensuing negotiations.⁹² Similarly when it came to the Hoover moratorium, the German payments standstill, and financial assistance to Austria, Germany and Britain, the *président du Conseil*, Pierre Laval, and Flandin took charge of negotiations, with Briand making only occasional contributions. Briand travelled with Laval to Berlin in September 1931 to settle terms for a new *Commission économique mixte franco-allemande*, but this was little more than a gesture whose purpose was to strengthen Chancellor Heinrich Brüning's position in German politics.⁹³ Briand did not accompany Laval on the more important voyage to Washington in October, to resolve the war debt-reparation conundrum before the Hoover debt moratorium came to an end.

Conclusion

Doctrinally Briand travelled far during his political career, from the radicalism republican of his youth to Marxist socialism and revolutionary syndicalism with a brief glance in the direction of *boulangisme* and anarchism, then rightwards to the cautiously progressive position of the *républicains indépendants*. His education was devoted almost exclusively to the humanities and his professional training to the law. With no formal or practical grounding in economics, he did not regard it as a separate body of knowledge or a set of relationships governed by its own laws. This led him to accept uncritically a large part of the conventional wisdom of the day: the need to balance the state budget, for markets and the gold standard as well as state subsidies for regional development. But his unfamiliarity with economic doctrine also made it easier for him to support innovations such as a progressive income tax and state pensions, and even to propose innovations of his own, such as the *principe de l'actionnariat collectif*, resolving the reparations dispute through Franco-German economic integration, and a European customs union. His deepest commitment was to the *République* that had provided him with his education and ascendancy to national leadership, and despite changing political affiliation he consistently sought

⁹¹ France, MAE Société des Nations, Union Europe 5, François Seydoux note pour M. Coulondre, 'urgent' 26 décembre 1930, Fouques Duparq note relative au programme des travaux de la Commission d'Etudes pour l'Union Européenne', 30 décembre 1930.

⁹² France, Ministère des Finances, B32290. 'Présidence du Conseil. Cabinet du Sous-secrétaire d'État. "Mémoire sur l'Anschluss économique"', reçu le 15 avril 1931; France, Ministère des Finances, B32290, 'Note au sujet de l'Union douanière Austro-Allemande', 24 avril 1931, 'approuvée par M. Flandin'; Britain, PRO, FO 371/15161, C2966/673/3, memorandum communicated by French ambassador, 4 May 1931. Boyce, *British Capitalism at the Crossroads*, p. 319-28.

⁹³ France, MAE Relations commerciales, B-Informations économiques 47, notes divers; France, MAE Papiers 1940, Papiers Léger 6, François-Poncet rapport à Briand, no. 14, 5 octobre 1931.

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to make the *République* acceptable to all classes. The desire to reconcile workers in particular to the state led him to favour public intervention of various sorts. He therefore shunned Manchester liberalism including free trade, unregulated markets and dependence upon private charity in the event of market failure, and as a young man he went so far as to advocate the nationalisation of the railways, the *Banque de France* and other financial institutions, before advocating more moderate reforms. The third stage of his career, from the Great War to 1932 when he devoted himself to the direction of France's foreign relations, helped to shape his economic outlook in new ways. He was constrained by the vastly increased public sensitivity to questions of national security, and by France's huge increase in national debt and chronically unstable external economic accounts. But he also operated in largely uncharted waters. On monetary and financial policy his lack of expertise put him at a disadvantage, and he allowed himself to be dominated by events, as in the financial and currency crisis of 1926. But in commercial policy and the management of inter-governmental debts it was a different matter. Here, less constrained by public or investor confidence, he demonstrated an open-minded attitude and a capacity for constructive innovation. As before, his chief concern remained the defence of the *République*, but his earlier preoccupation with social inclusion now gave way to an awareness of France's international vulnerability and the need to promote multilateral – European, if not international – solutions to economic problems. His policies were sometimes vaguely expressed, weakly pursued and unsuccessful. Arguably he erred in losing sight of the economic appeal of his proposal for European federation. At a time of unprecedented economic crisis, a political initiative that promised to save jobs and markets was of great potential attractiveness to all countries including even former enemies. That said, his ability to combine coherent political goals with economic innovation and his good sense of economic realities go some way to explain his exceptionally long period of national prominence and membership in a record number of republican governments.

L'auteur

Robert Boyce teaches international history at the London School of Economics and Political Science. A revised paperback version of his monograph, *The Great Interwar Crisis and the Collapse of Globalization*, has been published by Palgrave-Macmillan in 2011.

Robert Boyce enseigne l'histoire internationale à la London School of Economics and Political Science. Une version révisée de poche de son ouvrage, *La Grande crise de l'entre-deux-guerres et l'effondrement de la mondialisation*, a été publiée par Palgrave-Macmillan en 2011.

Résumé

Aristide Briand, for thirty years a leading politician in the Third Republic, had little direct interest in economics, but he was prepared to advocate economic innovation, including radical changes in domestic and international policy, where this seemed necessary to safeguard the Republic.

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Mots clés : Aristide Briand, culture économique, radicalisme, III^e République, socialisme.

Abstract

Aristide Briand fut pendant trente ans homme politique de premier plan de la Troisième République. Il montra peu d'intérêt pour les questions économiques, mais il était prêt à préconiser l'innovation économique, y compris des changements radicaux dans les choix politiques nationaux et internationaux, lorsque cela semblait nécessaire à la sauvegarde de la République.

Key words : Aristide Briand, economic ideas, radicalism, Third Republic, socialism.

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