

## Cultural Village of Europe

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### Contribution from Mellionec



## Relationship between the state and the local authorities

### 1. History

The relationship between the state and the local authorities had been marked by history and evolution of countries over the centuries. The unification of France is built around a central administration which developed in the 17th century under Louis XIV and his minister Colbert. However, disparities and a range of traditions and the powers of the church and the nobility. It was the revolution of 1789 which created the national assembly and put in place the administration we know today.

The abolition of privileges and specific taxes in favour of a uniform national system led to egalitarianism throughout the territories.

Different levels of administration that appeared :

'**la commune**' (village/town council), the smallest administrative division which became the territory administered by a mayor assisted by a local town council.

'**le canton**' (canton) an administrative district larger than a 'commune' but smaller than an 'arrondissement', the seat of a small town police force and the basis of the election of the councillors for a department.

'**le département**' (department), an area administered by a prefect who assists a department council.

'**la région**' (region), military, air and maritime area encompassing several departments and commanded by a general officer.

These principal historic divisions have evolved and if they still exist today, some have become more important and others less.

### 2. How France functions at present

Today France is a republic, comprising four levels of administrative regions with a measure for autonomy :

- The state ( or national level)  
And three levels of local authorities:
- The 'region' : there are 26.
- The 'departement' : there are 100.
- The 'communes' : there are 36778. They represent 41 % of the 'communes' of the European union and are distinct in having the smallest average number of inhabitants (1600).

These territorial divisions fit together one with another and completely cover the territory. The 'regions' and the 'departements' are also levels at which the state services are organised under the authority of the prefects who are nominated by the president of the republic. The role of each is defined by the decentralisation laws of 1982 and 1983 which organised the division of responsibility between the state and the administrative regions.

- The state has the monopoly for developing the law in respect of the constitution, setting tax rates, maintenance of law and order and national defence and the definition of major political issues (public health, right to work, social security , ...)
- The local authorities have their responsibilities and their level of autonomy defined precisely by law. For example, , the taxes levied by the local authorities are defined by the law, even if the taxes or the imposition of a tax is at the discretion of the authority.

Political, legal and financial autonomy of the local authorities is assured by :

- A council elected direct by universal suffrage for six years
- A president elected by members of the council and having executive power, for the ' commune' it is the mayor who is also representative of the state for civil functions, public order and organising elections.
- Their own budget, voted for each year by the council and comprising their own receipt - local taxes, and the allocation made each year by the state. The principal local taxes are building land tax, non-building land tax, housing tax and professional tax levied on economical activities.

This autonomy is assured and guaranteed by the law. This means that no authority has hierarchical power over another and cannot change decisions, neither the regions over the departments nor the departments over the town councils. If the prefect considers a decision illegal, he notifies the local authority and if they do not change it the prefect can take legal action. The budgetary control is effected by the regional chamber of accounts.

The extreme parcelling out of territory in France has made it necessary to group town and village council into syndicates, often for certain services (household waste, transport, ...) but more and more for multiple objectives (public facilities, town planning, ...). Recent reforms (law of July 1999) favour regrouping of ' communes' into ' communauté de communes' within a framework allowed by the law and with minimum obligations. Each community can define the range of their responsibilities, outside these that are obligatory, as well as the work that justifies the transfer of the responsibilities of the councils to the new communities. These regroupments are not obligatory but are strongly encouraged by financial and taxation measures. In January 2002 there were 1871 ' communautés de communes' .

### 3. Evolution bound up with Europe

As we have just seen, since the 19th century , the French government was organised on a pyramid model. The power was centralised in Paris and the decisions descended from Paris to the town level.

From the years 1960-1970, certain regions of France were subjected to abrupt socio-economic changes because of industrialisation and transformation of methods of productions. In Central Brittany this translated into the migration of the rural population towards the towns, a strong rise in unemployment and a loss of traditional points of reference tied up with its culture (music and celebrations ), its religion (masses and pardons), its language ( oral tradition, stories and literature), its social aspects (community life) and its economy (markets,...).

In 1981-1982 the government of the left, set up by François Mitterrand, implemented decentralisation; that is to say the transfer of certain responsibilities of state towards the regions and most of all the departments. By 1986 most of the changes had taken place and had strongly modified the focus of power and decision-making.

But the territory of ' Kreiz Breizh' (central Brittany), Mellionec, Lescouffouarec and all the other villages were more or less forgotten by the central parisian powers who had, in the previous years, proposed or imposed nuclear power stations and regrouping of agricultural land without consulting local people.

At that period, only Europe had already taken account of the problems of depopulation, loss of employment, closing down of businesses ...and because of this the plan MORGANE was born. In order to benefit from European aid several criteria had to be met :

- Taxes (fiscal potential)
  - The number of inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>
  - The unemployment rate
  - The migration of the population
- To create the plan MORGANE, Europe needed to interest local representatives, syndicates, associations, federations and ordinary people in order to create a Local Action Group. Hence GALCOB (Group of Local Action in west central Brittany) was born. This recognised association with a president, administrative council, secretary and treasurer empowered to carry out local initiatives financed by Europe.

Later there appeared, at a European level, LEADER programmes: Projects put in place to help the disadvantaged zones in Europe. Each recognised zone had to produce a plan of sustainable development comprising 7 directives :

- Conservation of heritage
  - The renewal of traditional and ordinary culture
  - Aid to agriculture
  - Educational development
  - Protection of the environment
  - Organisation of tourism and its infrastructure
  - Building of new systems of communications.
- All these initiatives were born thanks to many volunteers, local institutions, collaboration with Breton universities and a strong local education programme. This enabled the revitalisation of the country and the creation of new approaches in different domains ( culture, environment, ...).

The experience of GALCOB has allowed the reversal or modification of hierarchical decisions. The programme does not come from ' on high' but was thought out and organised by local people and relates directly to local needs identified by them.

#### Example

These initiatives within the framework of LEADER programme have made it possible to relaunch the cultivation of Breton wheat (buckwheat flour) held dear as a tradition of the country, for many centuries. However it took six years of negotiation to obtain authorisation to market this ' new product' . Europe has allowed the protection of a culture (in a larger sense) but, sadly has not overcome the little understood administration of the country. France (Paris) drags its feet. It is often ideological discussions and national politics that corrupt Europe and with certain internal conflicts in a country ultimate recourse is to the European Court of Justice.

The example of the return of the cultivation of wheat illustrates the possible modification of work methods and reflection with the state organisation; meetings related to work are local and no longer at a regional or state level although it is necessary for representatives to be present. These new types of local-state relationships allow the promotion of citizen led and the biodiversity of people and their territory and plans.

It is becoming evident that eventually we will follow the path to :

- Reinforce the powers of the ' community of communes' and the regions
- A diminution of interference of the state in local affairs whilst still maintaining a framework of legal regulation.
- Attain a more direct rapport between local organisations and various European Union' s organisations.