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Who is eligible?

The story of a local notable

2 August 1982

It is a beautiful summer afternoon and there is a large crowd in the village hall at Saint-Germain-des-Champs. The mayor of the village, M. Louis Devoir, is to receive a medal today, as are two municipal councillors and two members of the fire brigade. The atmosphere is relaxed but serious. The whole of Saint-Germain is there, of course, and many friends have come from other communes in the canton. The familiar faces of local dignitaries can be seen: the general secretary of the sub-prefecture, the head of the fire brigade, several mayors and people like M. de Chastellux, the 'lord of the manor' of the canton, and the descendant of a great Burgundian family. For M. Devoir is an important person: aged eighty-eight, he is the perfect example of an elected representative strongly attached to his commune, of which he has been the mayor since 1945. Well known to all, and a man of sound opinions, he has played an active part not only in local politics, but also in the various agricultural bodies of the department.

The president of the General Council and senator for the Yonne, M. Jean Chamant, has come in person to present the medals. He is a long-standing friend of the mayor of Saint-Germain. Formerly a Minister, under Georges Pompidou, he is himself a native of the Avallonnais and represents the canton of Quarré-les-Tombes on the General Council. Silence falls, and M. Chamant begins his speech on Louis Devoir. He draws a comparison between the oak trees of the forests of the Morvan and the mayor who is 'built to last a hundred years'. The senator then refers to the heavy demands of public service: elected representatives must always be available to listen to their fellow-citizens; they have to manage their commune and make sure its facilities are improved. They must mediate with the authorities. M. Chamant also mentions Louis Devoir's qualities of mind and heart. A true son of the Morvan, he has the ability to think deeply, he weighs his words

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and has the priceless virtue of loyalty to friends. The senator ends by expressing his gratitude for M. Devoir's constant loyalty to himself. He then pins the gold medal on M. Devoir's chest and presents the silver and vermeil medals to the municipal councillors. Then it is the turn of the Saint-Germain firemen to receive their medals, and in this speech M. Chamant emphasises the altruistic dedication shown by the firemen, mentioning the department's commitment to civil defence, with the establishment of first aid centres and the provision of the necessary human and material resources.

M. Devoir is next to speak: he thanks the senator and states that he is particularly touched by the award of this medal, which he is very proud to receive. 'Other distinctions which have been conferred on me are more important in the eyes of the world, but this medal is more precious to me because it is the concrete expression of the friendship and trust you have placed in me for so long and which I will never forget.' The speaker then informs his fellow-citizens of his decision not to stand for re-election in 1983. This is therefore the last ceremony in which he will participate as mayor. He is visibly moved, and the same emotion can be seen on the faces of those listening. The ceremony ends with the presentation by the mayor of Quarré-les-Tombes of a gift in the name of the mayors belonging to the association of communes of which he is president. It is two fine volumes of art history published by the monks of the Abbey of La-Pierre-qui-Vire, which is also in the canton. The guests of honour leave the dais; it is time for the reception. Possibly because of the heat, the excitement of the ceremony, or the emotion aroused in all by the announcement of M. Devoir's retirement, everyone is anxious to quench their thirst; drinks are brought round, and people begin to chat.

This was one of the first ceremonies I attended in the canton of Quarré. I had already met some elected representatives in the chief town and in the nearby villages, and was gradually discovering the forested landscapes and the austere majesty of this granitic region. 'Neither a good wind nor good men ever came out of the Morvan', says the proverb. This distrust is revealing: one has the impression that for a long time the geological contrast between the Morvan and the surrounding plains was the cause of the isolation of the inhabitants of the massif. The people have frequently interiorised the prejudices of which they were the object, to the point of describing themselves as withdrawn, as trapped in a natural landscape which is hardly an invitation to innovation and dynamism. They stress the difficulties experienced by stockbreeders in this terrain which is not rich enough to fatten beasts or develop cereal crops. The other agricultural region of the Avallonnais is known as the plain, and the people of the Morvan cast an envious eye over it, without, however, concealing their

almost ancestral dislike of its inhabitants. Quarré-les-Tombes is a small market town whose surrounding territory mainly consists of the forest belonging to the private estate of the Dukes. Early stock-rearing is practised. Traditional economic activities associated with the floating of logs down the river came to an end about fifty years ago. Farmers, shopkeepers in the market town and retired people make up the majority of the population of the canton.¹

M. Devoir's house stands a few yards from the town hall, next door to what was once the priest's house. He usually arranged to see me in his office at home, where he keeps the books and documents to which he refers when speaking of the Morvan, his commune and his family memories. M. Devoir frequently published short items about the history of Saint-Germain in the regular municipal bulletins. In a way he was the living memory of this history, and he recounted it willingly, with a fund of anecdotes and stories about local figures who have known a moment of glory. That is why when I first began my work I was naturally sent to see this man, whose wisdom and knowledge were recognised by everyone in the area. As I listened to my new mentor, and watched him in action, I could not help but notice the enthusiasm he showed for a certain form of public life, even though the questions I asked him about his politics seemed to leave him curiously indifferent. Like most of the mayors of the canton, my informant could be classified as right wing, and he and his family were church-goers. He seemed happy with the term 'moderate': candidates who had stood for the town council outside the mayor's list were generally considered leftists.

Louis Devoir had always won by a comfortable majority ever since he first took up his seat as mayor of the commune. On several occasions he did not even have any opposition list at the municipal elections. 'The result was a foregone conclusion', I was told by several inhabitants of Saint-Germain who had toyed at some time with the idea of presenting a rival list. This had not prevented the appearance of independent candidates, hoping to benefit from the practice of voting for candidates from more than one list, rather than just the set list from one party. However, for thirty years the mayor's team had regularly emerged the winner. When I asked M. Devoir how he first became mayor, he replied that he was a member of the town council from 1925. He became assistant mayor, a post in which he remained until the elections of 1935, when he decided not to stand for re-election. At this time he had taken over the family farm and had enough to do. Moreover, rival lists had appeared; he himself had grown somewhat distant from the mayor, but he had no wish, though he was urged to do so, to join the adversaries of the mayor, who in the event was re-elected and remained in office until 1945. M. Devoir therefore went through the war years without compromising himself with the Vichy regime, unlike many local representa-

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tives. As for the retiring mayor, there was absolutely no question of his standing again in 1945.

‘There were three opposing lists’, M. Devoir related. ‘Despite many pressing invitations, I did not join any list. Only three candidates were elected. Although I was not one of them, I did win a impressive number of votes. At the insistence of several friends, I decided to stand again at the second ballot. The ballot-papers I had printed carried only my name.’ And the miracle happened. In M. Devoir’s own words: ‘I was pleasantly surprised by the number of votes I obtained – 75 per cent, sixty votes more than my nearest rival.’ That is how M. Devoir became mayor, persuaded, as it were, by public opinion, in a sort of plebiscite. Moreover, when he referred to the subsequent stages of his political career, the mayor of Saint-Germain continued to emphasise the commune’s enthusiasm for his management of the town’s affairs: ‘At the next election, which in this particular instance was held two years later in 1947, all those who had been elected in 1945 were on my list; there were no other lists, and they were all elected. We were united again.’

To be the man who brings people together, and who puts an end to the antagonisms of the past (we must not forget that the war was not long over) was M. Devoir’s constant ambition from then on.

In six subsequent elections, I only had a rival list once. No one from it was elected. At each election I had the largest number of votes, except for one occasion, when another candidate got two votes more than me. The last time I stood, in 1977, I got 231 out of 310 votes. The candidate immediately behind me got 224 and the third, 162. I am proud to say that in the thirty-eight years that I have been mayor, I have stood for unity and mutual understanding.

I have taken these words and the earlier remarks from a small volume of memoirs which M. Devoir has written for his family: *Au fil des jours et des ans* (*Down the Days and the Years*).² They could have been written by many of the rural mayors I met. In them, the mayor of Saint-Germain establishes a strong connection between his desire for consensus and the uncontested nature of his victories. He implies that he does not represent a faction, since a majority of the votes automatically go to him. It is not out of vanity that the mayor insists on the strength of his vote in comparison with his nearest rival. If the difference were to decrease, alarm bells would ring: it would mean that the mayor’s name had lost its magic, that it was no longer a magnet drawing people together.

I place great emphasis on the importance given to the *name*, for it worked as a sort of Open Sesame during M. Devoir’s electoral career. He refused to join any side in the first round of the elections in 1945. He ended up, as we saw, standing in the second round, but being careful to put forward only his name. No manifesto, just one crucial detail: the identity of the candidate. It

was more significant than a manifesto or any amount of empty polemics. The name carried the secret of the candidate's legitimacy. From my interviews with M. Devoir, there had in fact emerged an important dimension to the figure of the elected representative, unrelated to his managerial abilities or his political allegiances. I slowly came to realise that in this case the candidate represented not merely himself, but the continuity of a distinguished family line. Moreover, when he told his story, my informant gave little emphasis to his activities as a farmer, but was much more forthcoming when it came to his predecessors in the office of mayor.

A distinguished family line

M. Devoir spoke to me at length about his father and his ancestors in general. He had drawn up a family tree going back to the eighteenth century, with the birth in 1715 of a peasant named Claude Devoir, who later married Claudine Villain. Amongst their direct descendants was a grandson named Thomas, who as well as being a husbandman, worked as a schoolmaster. He had taken over this role from Etienne Dizien, who died young, leaving two sons, Jean and Etienne. Later Thomas married his predecessor's widow. Four children were born to them. Louis-Philippe, the mayor's grandfather, became a farmer. A second son, Philippe, loved adventure and went off to Brazil, where he was an engineer working on the installation of the railways: he would return for brief visits to his family. Called up in 1914, he was killed in action soon after. Another brother, Auguste, chose the military life, and settled later in Lunéville, where he ran the officers' club. Médéric followed in his father's footsteps and became a schoolteacher. He later left Saint-Germain, became Secretary at the Education Offices in Bordeaux and ended his career in Sens, his wife's native town, where he was the bursar of the poorhouses. His son became a doctor and his daughter married a teacher in a *lycée*.

Only one of Thomas's sons, then, had chosen to stay on the land: admittedly, their father, who had obtained his certificate (*certificat d'études*) and worked as a teacher since 1833, must have had some influence on the choices of the other three. Thomas Devoir had also brought up the two sons of Etienne Dizien. There is a strong resemblance between their careers and those of their half-brothers. Jean Dizien sat his higher certificate at Auxerre and became first a teacher, then deputy head of the teacher training college in that town. His brother Etienne joined the army, and took part in the Crimean campaign, for which he was made a Knight of the Legion of Honour. Returning ill from Algeria, where he was involved in the pacification, Captain Dizien died in his native village. Like the Devoirs, the Diziens were proud to be loyal servants of the State, whether in the army or as schoolmasters. The brother of Thomas Devoir's predecessor taught at

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the school in Cure, a village near Vézelay. He married Claudine Devoir. One of his sons was headmaster for many years of the primary school at Avallon, and the second entered the Church and became first of all vicar-general of Sens, then Bishop of Amiens. The Army, Education, the Church: these great national institutions are highly valued amongst such families, with their solid peasant roots. There was not, at the end of the nineteenth century, that rejection of religion observable in other schoolmaster families. Anti-clericalism, which as we shall see spread like wildfire in this area, seems in this case to have come up against a family tradition in which the Church and education were very closely associated as dispensers of knowledge and pillars of the same culture. After all, had not Thomas Devoir, appointed as primary school teacher in 1833 by an order signed by François Guizot, received his licence to teach some years earlier from the Cardinal of La Fare, Archbishop of Sens and Auxerre, Primate of the Gauls and Germany?

The name of Devoir is therefore associated on the one hand with the development of education in the commune of Saint-Germain. However, Louis Devoir's infancy was spent with stories ringing in his ears of the feats of Captain Dizien, hero of Sebastopol, to whose memory a monument was erected. The town council agreed unanimously to grant a plot of land in perpetuity to the family so that the monument could be built: the memory of this soldier who set off in search of glory appealed to the imagination and contributed to the prestige of the Devoir family. At the end of the last century, those of the family who remained in the village and dedicated themselves to the land benefited in a sense from this symbolic capital accumulated by their relatives in the service of the nation. Médéric, the father of M. Devoir, was a farmer who had a smallholding and a few animals and whose daily life was little different from that of other inhabitants of the region:

We had a team of two oxen and a horse. The reaping and gathering in had to be done every year, so my father bought a mechanical reaper in 1912. The threshing was done with a very simple piece of equipment: a threshing-machine worked by a horse walking round. Then the winnowing had to be done with another primitive machine.³

Unlike many other peasants, however, Médéric Devoir, after getting his primary leaving certificate, continued with his studies for some time; he was sent as a boarder to the higher elementary school in Avallon, where he obtained his elementary diploma. He owed this extension of his education to his cousin Etienne Dizien, the headmaster of the school.

Médéric was ten years old in 1870; the defeat and then the collapse of the Empire, followed by the proclamation of the Third Republic, began one of the most troubled periods in the history of Saint-Germain. The arguments

between republicans and Bonapartists shook the commune. Families who had been friendly quarrelled; one family decided to leave the place because of the harassment they suffered. In the patriotic atmosphere of the time, 'scholar battalions' were formed: training took place at the school and Médéric was made instructor in 1883. The mayor, Barbier, a fervent Bonapartist, had been appointed in 1874; his predecessor, who had been more favourable to republican ideas, had had to resign when his political enemies managed to have him brought before the courts on the pretext of an irregularity, in fact well intentioned, in his administration. Barbier was a timber merchant who had some land in the area. An incident which gave rise to a quarrel between him and Médéric was to alter the political life of the commune. As military instructor, Médéric had a right to exemption from military service, but he had to have a certificate from the mayor testifying that he had indeed carried out periods of instruction. Barbier refused the certificate, alleging that he was not sure whether the instruction had taken place. Médéric therefore had to do his military service, but the injustice suffered was the main reason why he decided to stand in the 1888 elections. He won, and was to continue as mayor until 1910, when he retired voluntarily from public life.

It was a splendid period in the life of the commune, distinguished by public works and by the installation first of all of the telegraph and then of the telephone, the first in the canton. Médéric Devoir gained a reputation for efficiency and competence. He acted as an expert adviser in cases of disputed ownership of agricultural lands. A little later he was appointed deputy magistrate of the chief town. His fame also won him some political friendships that went beyond the limits of the commune. For Médéric had declared his opposition to the Law of Separation of Church and State, and had formed a friendship with Etienne Flandin, the member for Vézelay of the General Council, who regularly stood against the Radical-Socialist Albert Gallot. (They alternated with each other between 1893 and 1914.) Until his death in 1936, Médéric remained a respected and influential figure locally. Whether or not his decision to stand for election was motivated by anger, as the anecdote has it, his political success was in no sense the result of chance. The position of the Devoir family, and the education which the future mayor of Saint-Germain received, predisposed him to some extent to his future role. Still, it was he who really brought the name to prominence, and one can understand why, in 1945, once again troubled times, the electors should naturally have turned once more to the bearer of this name.

Louis Devoir, then, can be seen as the natural successor to Médéric. He had come to renew a tradition. His father had earlier re-established harmony in the commune, then a troubled period of wars and political antagonisms came round once more. Remember that M. Devoir withdrew

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in 1935, rather than take part in factional struggles. However, his father's successor had made Louis Devoir his assistant mayor. Thus the flame was not extinguished, especially since Louis Devoir found himself appointed an adviser in questions of land-ownership and a magistrate, just like his father Médéric before him. Nor was that all. When, after the war, new agricultural organisations were set up, with the disappearance of the Peasant Corporation, the future mayor of Saint-Germain was approached to join the Departmental Agricultural Action Committee composed of eight members appointed by order of the prefect on 2 October 1944. He represented the Avallonnais and remained on the committee until the reappearance of the Chambers of Agriculture. He was then elected to the Chamber of Agriculture of the Yonne, of which he became the first vice-president, remaining in this office for fifteen years. Thus we see how M. Devoir became what is commonly known as a local notable. He also sat on the army recruiting board, and on various other bodies:

I was president of a union of potato seedling producers for the whole of the Morvan. It was while I was president that the silo at Quarré was built. I was a member of the departmental management committees of agricultural mutual benefit insurance companies and mutual aid societies, and I was vice-president for several years of the regional committee for the study and development of the Morvan, set up and chaired by M. de Vogüé.⁴

Over the years, the bonds between the mayor and his electors grew stronger: M. Devoir had enough influence in the department to ensure the success of his interventions on behalf of his community. He also managed to obtain subsidies for useful public works to be carried out. One can see the result of this activity in his manifestoes, where he details the successful projects he initiated. There is a detailed list of these in his 1953 election manifesto: public buildings, roads and highways, telephone facilities, water, local finances. 'DRAW YOUR OWN CONCLUSIONS', the pamphlet tell voters: 'If you believe we have fulfilled the mission you entrusted to us, and we deserve to continue, VOTE for the list we present. If you think we have failed, and that others can do better, VOTE for them. We will give way to them without bitterness, wishing them GOOD LUCK.'⁵ Here you can see in a condensed form the whole political style of the mayor of Saint-Germain: the emphasis on management, the 'apolitical' stance, the aim of improving conditions in his commune. Not so very different from that of the majority of rural representatives, and therefore a highly significant attitude. The retiring officers claim their legitimacy has been reinforced by the actions of which they boast, and challenge their rivals to do better.

In our conversations, M. Devoir placed much emphasis on friendships he had formed beyond the boundaries of Saint-Germain with political figures from the department. The name Flandin recurred, and we shall hear more

of it, for this family has played an important part in the life of the Yonne. We saw that Médéric was involved with Etienne Flandin: like Flandin, Médéric considered himself a republican, but shunned Radicalism. He took an active part in Flandin's electoral campaigns. Remember that Etienne Dizien had settled in Cure, the village where Etienne Flandin lived. The latter, an important figure in the locality, would visit Médéric, and he set great stock by Médéric's advice. In 1914, the seat fell vacant and Etienne Flandin was elected senator for the French Indies and Médéric was asked to advise on the suitability as a candidate of the young grandson of the retiring deputy. He was only just over the legal age, and was still undecided, and Médéric Devoir was 'one of those who did most to persuade the young Pierre-Etienne Flandin that he should put himself forward as a candidate, and to get him accepted'.⁶ When Louis Devoir decided to anticipate the call and enlist in 1913, the Flandins reappeared once more. 'Young Pierre-Etienne Flandin had come to my father's house a few days earlier, and offered to take me along, which he did.' Pierre-Etienne and his wife were, of course, invited to the wedding of the future mayor, and 'insisted on being present despite a recent death in the family'.

Between the two world wars, Pierre-Etienne Flandin was without question the best-known politician in the Yonne: he was a Minister several times, and Prime Minister, so he was the outstanding public figure in the department. However, I shall be turning to this man and the story of his political career later; for the moment it suffices to note that Louis Devoir's loyalty to him never faltered, even after Flandin had left the public stage.

Similarly, the mayor of Saint-Germain always loyally supported Jean Chamant, the deputy for the Avallonnais since 1945. We saw that it was Chamant who awarded the medal of honour of the commune and of the department to M. Devoir, who was one of those who suggested the name of Chamant to replace in the General Council the mayor of Quarré, who had died in 1964. Devoir could have put himself forward, as many of his fellow-citizens urged him to do, but he felt it was wiser to remain on the sidelines. It is always an asset to have as the member of the General Council a politician who is influential at national level, and rural representatives use all their skill to extract maximum advantage from this kind of situation: the presence of a Flandin or, later, a Chamant helped to ensure that manna in the form of subsidies fell on the canton and more particularly on the communes of which their friends were mayors. From the deputy's point of view, the support of a man like Devoir was invaluable, and it was no coincidence that when Chamant found himself in need of a substitute at the time of the general election of 1958, he should turn to the mayor of Saint-Germain: 'My first thought was to ask you to be my substitute deputy. It would be first of all an honour for me and secondly a source of satisfaction

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throughout the region, for your fame reaches beyond the limits of the Avallonnais', the deputy for the Yonne wrote in a note.⁷ However, M. Devoir did not agree to the request: as he later humorously pointed out, if he had accepted he would have had to sit in the Chamber of Deputies when Chamant subsequently became a Minister.

Some fifteen years earlier, Chamant, then a young deputy for the Yonne, tried on behalf of a group of Independent Republicans to persuade the mayor of Saint-Germain to stand for election to the General Council. In his letter, the deputy referred to conversations he had had on the subject with the president of the General Council, the deputy and mayor of Auxerre, Jean Moreau, and the senators:

M. Jean Moreau himself has decided to make a last appeal to you. We believe you can hardly refuse, under these conditions.

As you know, I am entirely at your disposal, to take you all round the canton in my car: I shall drive, and we shall soon accomplish our mission. Dr Plait and M. de Raincourt have also asked me to say that if their presence is of any help you only have to ask.

Our joint efforts cannot help but end in a triumph which will be a fitting demonstration of the esteem in which you are held throughout the canton.⁸

M. Devoir, however, turned down the chance of standing in this cantonal election of 1949. He seems to have had no wish to take up any political position outside the bounds of the commune. Though quite at ease in his role as spokesman for the peasant world at departmental level, he felt unwilling to go any higher; his concept of the roles of member of the General Council and deputy led him to favour candidates who had an entrée into political and governmental circles in the capital. This was how M. Devoir saw it, and this desire to remain in his place, ignoring the siren voices of political ambition, goes a long way to explaining his constant re-election and the fame he acquired in the Avallonnais.

In 1983, after nearly half a century as an elected representative, M. Devoir decided to retire from public life. For a successor, he turned to his principal assistant mayor, Louis Dizien. The latter belongs to a family which has had close links with the Devoirs for generations. If we go back in time, we find, for example, a marriage between Jean Dizien and Marie Devoir in 1767. They had seven children, among them Etienne, one of whose sons was none other than the schoolteacher of Saint-Germain whose widow was to marry Thomas Devoir. Another of Etienne's sons, a teacher at Cure, married, as we have seen, a Claudine Devoir, granddaughter of Claude. Jean Dizien, son of a brother of Etienne, also married a Devoir, Anne. The granddaughter of this Jean Dizien was none other than the wife of Médéric Devoir, the mother of Louis Devoir. One of the latter's daughters married Jean Dizien, who is the grandson of a brother of Médéric