

Charles SCHEER (1871-1936), Member of Parliament for Haut-Rhin (1919-1929) Extracts from a speech given in the Chamber of Deputies

on 12 December 1921

"For two years, Members from Alsace and Lorraine have maintained an attitude of respectful silence in this House... We would have liked to continue in this attitude... It is no longer possible for us to remain silent... For there is a danger of some misunderstanding arising between ourselves and our brothers in the interior... Today we see improvised doctors come to Alsace and apply the thermometer to our people to measure the national temperature, then they return to Paris to confide their impressions to the public in (exaggerated) articles...

They talk about the Alsatian malaise. Let me explain.

The Alsatian malaise is first and foremost a form of the general malaise... which exists here as it does in France and has an influence on the mentality of our population.... What is particular to the Alsatian malaise is the Alsations' concern about their future and their interests following the introduction of French legislation...

To make myself clear, I would like to review the different classes of our population.

Let's take the workers first. We have social insurance. All the newspaper articles say that we need rapid assimilation. Does this mean that the legislation we have should be abolished? What will become of their social insurance?

Take our railway workers... Will their rights be safeguarded... if we assimilate them?

Take our farmers, our tobacco growers... With the return to France, what will their situation be the day the tobacco monopoly is introduced?

Take the winegrowers: the day the wine trade system as it exists in France is introduced in Alsace, our winegrowers will be ruined.

Let's move up the social ladder a little and take the shopkeepers and industrialists. Their trade was oriented towards the right bank of the Rhine. We are happy that the peace negotiators reserved rights for Alsace-Lorraine for a certain period of time. But there will come a time when the Rhine border will close for them... How

will we then be able to direct our trade towards the interior of France? Worry gripped their minds...

(Then there is further mention of pharmacists, magistrates and lawyers...)....

Above all, there is great concern among civil servants... There is a sort of systematic tendency not to allow Alsatian civil servants access to higher positions... they feel that they are being treated with suspicion, and it is against this that they are protesting... There's also talk of forcing all Alsatian civil servants to spend time in France... While I agree that every effort should be made to allow them to come and stay in France, I will oppose in the strongest terms any attempt to force them to do so. Really, should we make France a land of exile for them? That would not make them love France; on the contrary, they would return with bitterness in their hearts...

(and then...) There is a whole series of institutions and organisations that would fall apart the day French legislation was simply introduced: for example, the institution of the land register, compulsory schooling up to the age of 1?, the education of morally abandoned children...

Above all, there is the question of our communal autonomy. Local legislation is very different from that in the interior... Our big cities have made great efforts in the areas of hygiene, schools and social action...

I would also like to say a few words about the problem of religion and education... There will come a time when, after careful preparation, we will discuss these two serious issues. We will then be at our posts...

(There follow questions about the too hasty abolition of the Commissariat Général...) We shouldn't start by abolishing what's good in our country and then introduce it later in France!

Alongside these issues there are also a number of special complaints that are the cause of the malaise in Alsace; I would like to talk about the Administration... I am far from claiming that the civil servants who came from the interior deserve criticism... What I am criticising is not the men, but a certain method... When you come into an office, you're very well received... But when you ask a question, you never get an answer. Maybe", they say, "we'll see". After a while comes the reply: "We're sorry we couldn't follow up your request". We would much prefer it if a civil servant told us clearly: "What you are asking for cannot be granted", rather than these eternal "perhaps" that raise hopes that are quickly dashed.

Allow me to explain to you some aspects of the Alsatian mentality that seem a little strange to you. National feeling is a natural feeling. We love the country in which we were born. It is very rare for people to be called upon to choose a nation. Yet this is the situation in which the Alsatian-Lorrainer finds himself.... His feeling of patriotism has become a feeling of love for the land where he was born. This is what saved him from German domination.

For 48 years, all we did was repeat to our compatriots: "Alsace for the Alsations! Gentlemen, do you think that after 3 years they could have already forgotten that? Don't you think that a certain amount of time is needed to transform this state of mind?"

The autonomism that Alsations are often criticised for is not political, apart from rare exceptions, it is psychological, a feeling. After having been deeply affected by its history, Alsace needs a moment to reflect, to rediscover itself.

Isn't it extraordinary that a people speaking a Germanic dialect who, for 50 years, had all the linguistic facilities to assimilate into Germany, at the very time when it was experiencing extraordinary economic growth, shouldn't there be something marvellous in the fact that this people, nevertheless, has always been nostalgic for France?

The policy I hope to see followed in Alsace?

= That it be a policy of trust. I have to admit that, very often, we have had the feeling that this was not the policy followed in Alsace, that it was only a conditional trust with the benefit of an inventory... These constant searches to find out if we could find in the life of such and such a person a concession that he made to Germany, a word that he said, it's a real misfortune, and it drives away those who want to come to France!

...Involve the people of Alsace in government action, and you will soon see the results. We always like what we work for. You can count on their total dedication.

= I am also asking for a policy of patience... These articles, which are constantly stirring up Alsatian problems, are a great danger. The Alsations must feel that France is so sure of the hearts of the Alsations that it can proceed slowly with external assimilation, that it can study with a clear head all the reforms that need to be made here, and that it is not necessary to rush everything....

= Finally, I call for a firm policy. I, who am an adherent of gentle methods, must be firm towards those elements who have an interest in disturbing the peaceful development of Alsace by taking advantage of the mistakes made by the government... to sow mistrust in the hearts of my compatriots.

I'd like to finish with these words:

"Alsace is French! Have confidence in it!

You will see that it will be able to give that part of its mentality, of its genius, which will only enrich the whole country".

Charles SCHEER, born in Strasbourg in 1871, became a pastor in Mulhouse. During the final years of the 1914-18 conflict, he was exiled to East Prussia, then to Göttingen, for showing his attachment to France. On his return, he was elected deputy for Haut-Rhin (1919 - 1929). His speech, which he gave in the Chamber of Deputies on 12 December 1921, was posted in every commune in France. After working as a pastor, he became a professor at the Protestant Faculty of Theology in Strasbourg. He died there in 1936.