PRIX
FRANÇOIS GUIZOT
INSTITUT DE FRANCE



Prix François Guizot-Institut de France 2026

Award ceremony

Monday 5th October 2026, 6:00 PM, Grande Salle des Séances

Speech of Eric Roussel

Président of the jury

It was only natural that our jury should decide this year to honour the major book that Christophe Bellon has devoted to Waldeck-Rousseau.

Waldeck-Rousseau has, so to speak, come back from far away. As President of the Council from June 1899 to June 1902, he led the longest-serving government of the Third Republic. His achievements are considerable. We owe to him, in particular, the 1884 law on trade-union freedom and the 1901 law on associations. We also owe to him a powerful contribution to ending the Dreyfus Affair in favour of the unfortunate officer, who had for so long been wrongly accused and held in appalling conditions on Devil's Island. Finally, we owe to him the fact that he gave the Third Republic, a regime still fragile at the end of the nineteenth century and shaken by scandals, a kind of centre of gravity. He did so by relying on what may be called, without anachronism, a central bloc. It shut out the extremes but broadly united men who were divided on almost everything (there were no women in politics at the time), from General de Gallifet, the "butcher of the Commune," to the socialist Alexandre Millerand.

And yet this striking and eminent figure, endearing as you show him to be, does not hold the place he deserves in history. Paul Reynaud, who saw himself as following in his footsteps, wrote a book about him. President Giscard d'Estaing, who found him an inspiring figure, considered naming his club Perspectives et Réalités after him, but gave up the idea for fear of being misunderstood. The last biography of him, by Pierre Sorlin, was published sixty years ago, in 1966. Since

then, there has been silence. Waldeck-Rousseau has remained overshadowed by those regarded as the "greats" of the Third Republic: Gambetta, Jules Ferry, Clemenceau. He was shy, cold and secretive, and seemed oddly to shun fame. So much so that Maurice Barrès cruelly described him as "frozen in his silence, like a pike in its aspic."

Rescuing such a figure from oblivion was a challenge, and you have met it brilliantly, dear Christophe Bellon. You set out patiently and methodically in search of your hero, in the memoirs of his contemporaries, in the archives and in the studies he has inspired. The result is a profoundly renewed portrait of Waldeck-Rousseau. You did not limit your curiosity to your subject's political action. You also sought to reveal the inner personality of this seemingly rigid figure.

There is something rather enigmatic about this man. His private life seems to have amounted to a deep attachment to his mother, with whom he corresponded constantly, and a late marriage to a far more sociable woman who certainly played a part in his destiny. Before meeting her, this taciturn bachelor seems to have had no passion other than work. Like his father, who was notably mayor of Nantes, Waldeck-Rousseau was a lawyer and spent his life absorbed in his case files. Social questions fascinated him. In the courts, where his precise and cool eloquence made a strong impression, he built a solid reputation. His marriage, however, opened up other prospects. Helped by the social connections of his wife, who kept a renowned salon, he became a prominent business lawyer. He did not abandon his convictions for all that. He was neither a Radical nor a socialist, yet he was convinced that the Republic would endure only if it found a solution to the social question. At the end of a nineteenth century marked by the clash between Catholics and republicans, the question of secularism (*laïcité*) also held his attention. He intended to resolve it while taking care to avoid needless divisions. "Fighting clericalism and its excesses," you write, "must not lead to other excesses, which he found just as objectionable, such as the establishment of a state anticlericalism. He wants a secularism that recognises the different orders: the order of religion on the one hand and the political order on the other; individual conscience on one side and collective values on the other. Only this distinction can open the way to mediation." Forced by ill health to withdraw from public life, Waldeck-Rousseau would not approve of the way Combes applied the law separating Church and State. He had failed to see Émile Combes's true character when he suggested his name to the head of state as his successor. In his eyes,

Combes was wrong to exclude rather than to bring people together, which had been the guiding principle of Waldeck-Rousseau's entire life.

Your book shows this consistency vividly. He was Minister of the Interior in Gambetta's short-lived government of 1881–1882, then in Jules Ferry's second cabinet from 1883 to 1885. In those posts he championed freedom of association, which took concrete form with the passing in 1884 of a law that bears his name. In 1899 he became President of the Council at Poincaré's prompting. France was then torn apart by the religious quarrel and the Dreyfus Affair. Once again, Waldeck's main concern was to calm things down. He decided on a review of the Dreyfus trial, cracked down on nationalist agitation and supported social legislation. A law on the work of women and children was enacted on 30 March 1900. It was followed on 30 September by the Millerand-Colliard law, which reduced the working day to eleven hours. Meanwhile, the Finance Minister, Joseph Caillaux, managed to cut state spending and ultimately to present a budget surplus. The Waldeck-Rousseau government, which brought together men of very diverse political shades, thus succeeded for a time in giving the country back a sense of direction and stability.

One hundred and twenty-six years later, France is once again going through a period of turbulence, and governments face problems that, if not identical, are at least of the same kind. As a result, the figure of Waldeck-Rousseau has found a new resonance.

Finally, and this was not entirely unrelated to our choice, Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau unquestionably belongs to a lineage, a political tradition that in the nineteenth century had been embodied before him by Guizot, among others. The two men's personalities were of course different. Yet they shared a curious contrast between the coldness they both showed at first sight and the powerful eloquence that was their weapon of choice. Above all, Waldeck-Rousseau and Guizot belonged to a political family that may be called centrist. Raymond Aron described this liberal family as "that of the eternally defeated, the internal exiles, admired outside France but without visible influence within it." Indeed, these advocates of reform were very rarely able to gain power, no doubt because of the way the French Revolution shaped the collective imagination and gave pride of place to violent ruptures. After Waldeck-Rousseau, Paul Reynaud managed to embody this tradition in the twentieth century, unfortunately at a particularly tragic moment, the spring of 1940. Later, as I mentioned, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing took up this tradition. In doing so he exposed himself to the well-known

difficulties that led to his defeat in 1981. Today, the current President of the Republic, who also claims to move beyond the traditional political divides, is exposed to the same uncertainties.

By bringing Waldeck-Rousseau, this great forgotten figure of history, back to life, you are not only righting an injustice, dear Christophe Bellon. You are also helping us to understand the present, and that is not the least of this book's merits.