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INSTITUT DE FRANCE




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**Award ceremony**

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

# Speech of Christophe Bellon

# Winner

*Chancellor of the Institut de France,*
*Ministers,*
*Members and Corresponding Members of the Institut,*
*President of the Association François Guizot,*
*Chairman and Members of the Jury,*
*Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen*

Receiving the Guizot Prize of the Institut de France is an honour whose full significance I am well aware of. Some distinctions reward, first and foremost, a piece of work. Others go beyond that reward. Through the name they bear and the institution that awards them, they invite us to take a line of thought further, to place our research within an intellectual tradition, and to take part, however modestly, in a conversation that began several generations before us. The Guizot Prize belongs rather to this second category.

For to speak the name of François Guizot is to evoke far more than a historian, a statesman or a minister. It is to summon up an entire conception of history, liberty, authority and political progress. I would therefore like, first of all,

to devote my remarks to the comparison between François Guizot and René Waldeck-Rousseau, a historical parallel that I find particularly fruitful.

The two men belong to two different generations, two different political regimes and two distinct moments in our political history. They share neither the same institutional references nor the same conception of sovereignty. Yet their careers bring to light several common concerns, and I see at least three: governing in times of crisis, the conception of the State and of authority, and the place of liberty. I will conclude by emphasising how Waldeck-Rousseau's action resonates in our contemporary society, and by recalling the role of history in shaping judgement and the responsibility of those who pass it on.

**Two Statesmen for Troubled Times**

The first thing François Guizot and René Waldeck-Rousseau have in common is that they held political office at times when France was seeking to define the conditions for its own stability. Guizot grew up in a world turned upside down by the collapse of the political order of the Ancien Régime and by successive attempts to replace it with new institutions. His work as a historian cannot be separated from this experience.

Waldeck-Rousseau belonged to a generation that had not directly lived through the Revolution of 1789 but had inherited its consequences, its conflicts and its promises. Like Guizot, he even wrote a book on the revolutionary period. His was published posthumously under the title *Ce qui tue les Républiques* (*What Kills Republics*). He saw the regime gradually take root, but he also saw the opposition that threatened its consolidation.

The two men's experiences, their culture and their immediate surroundings were admittedly not quite the same. But these led them to a similar question: how can one build a political order that will last? How can the Republic be made "definitive," to use Waldeck-Rousseau's own words?

In Guizot's case, this question took the form of a reflection on representative government, on the ability of institutions to handle social conflict, and on the need for a recognised political authority. In Waldeck-Rousseau's case, it found expression above all in compromise, in the search for a Republic able to overcome the clashes that had marked its first decades. He first saw the solution in the unity of all republicans, a unity he considered vital to a lasting regime.

To govern is to think about the system of government: how institutions work, the interests at stake, political traditions, and the practical conditions under which a reform can be undertaken.

## Two Conceptions of the State and of Authority

The second similarity between Guizot and Waldeck-Rousseau lies in the importance they both attached to the State and to the solidity of institutions. For Guizot, representative government rests on one fundamental idea: political power must be organised and limited, and it must be exercised by institutions that make deliberation and continuity in public action possible.

His liberalism did not call for the State to step back. It was indeed a state liberalism, that is, the principle that a government's first duty is to protect individual liberties.

Waldeck-Rousseau, for his part, enjoyed reading Guizot. As his aides noted, he "would long immerse himself in the political and social psychology that makes the *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de mon temps* (*Memoirs to Illustrate the History of My Time*) one of the works of use to any mind eager to study the art and science of government."

Waldeck-Rousseau took inspiration from Guizot's counsel, but he acted within a republican framework. Universal male suffrage was by then established and had brought the electorate to almost ten million voters. The task was no longer to build a government reserved for one section of the population. It was to make

a regime founded on national sovereignty and parliamentary rule work over the long term. Within this framework, he too attached considerable importance to the solidity of institutions. This was already the case in 1881, and again in 1883, when he was Minister of the Interior. More than fifteen years later, his government, formed in June 1899, took office amid a deep political crisis, shaped by the fallout of the Dreyfus Affair and by clashes between republicans, nationalists and opponents of the regime.

The Government of Republican Defence formed by Waldeck-Rousseau brought together figures of differing political leanings, among them the socialist Alexandre Millerand and General de Galliffet. This choice reflects a distinctive conception of governmental responsibility, in which defending the Republic can, and must, require compromises between political forces that do not share all of each other's programmes.

Waldeck-Rousseau therefore did not reduce politics to the assertion of a party identity. He sought to create the conditions for public action that could preserve the continuity of the State and the stability of the regime. This is what underlay his support for list voting (*scrutin de liste*), a system that is also majoritarian. His ministry, which lasted from 1899 to 1902, was in fact the longest of the Third Republic.

Along the way, the two men thus invite us to ask ourselves some questions. A regime may disappear while certain institutional questions remain. How should power be organised? How can it be kept from becoming arbitrary? How can the authority that public action requires be reconciled with the liberties that justify it? These questions run through the generations because they are never settled once and for all.

## Liberty: A Principle That Requires Institutions

The third point of agreement between the two men concerns liberty. It would be misleading, however, to claim that Guizot and Waldeck-Rousseau defined it in the same way. Their conceptions of liberty were shaped by different historical contexts, political traditions and objectives. But they shared one conviction: liberty cannot endure without institutions able to protect it and organise how it is exercised.

For Guizot, political and parliamentary liberties are closely bound up with intellectual liberties. His conception of liberty is not limited to taking part in elections. It also involves education, the free circulation of ideas and the existence of spaces for reflection independent of those in power. His work on behalf of primary education, notably through the 1833 law on education (*the Guizot Law*), belongs to this outlook.

Waldeck-Rousseau approached the question from a different experience: that of the Republic and of the rise of collective organisations. His legislative work on behalf of trade unions, with the law of 1884, and then his decisive role in the passing of the 1901 law on associations, show his concern for making citizens take responsibility.

Liberty is not expressed only in the relationship between the individual and the State. It also unfolds in relations between individuals themselves, when they organise to defend common interests, develop activities or take part in collective life. To root the Republic is to make people love the Republic.

For Waldeck-Rousseau, liberty finds strong expression in collective freedoms. Like Guizot, Waldeck-Rousseau put authority at the service of liberty. He was certainly a reformer, but all his reforms fitted within the framework of a liberal society. In England, a country he referred to on several occasions, the former head of the Government of Republican Defence is regularly cited; he is even described as a French Disraeli or a French Lloyd George. Before Waldeck-Rousseau, Guizot had also admired England, which he called "a great and honest nation, in which morality, sincerity, pride, energy and perseverance prevail."

**The Institut de France: An Institution Where Thought and Action Meet**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would now like to come back to the institution that brings us together this evening. Receiving the Guizot Prize of the Institut de France gives this historical comparison a particular resonance. François Guizot was not only a politician and a historian. He also had close ties with learned institutions and with French intellectual life. His role in re-establishing the Académie des sciences morales et politiques in 1832 shows how much importance he attached to reflection on societies, institutions and the principles of public action.

Through its history and the diversity of its academies, the Institut de France embodies this ambition to bring disciplines into dialogue. Is it not its role to keep alive a demanding commitment to research, debate and transmission? It is in this spirit that I wish to express my gratitude to the Institut de France. I thank the members of the jury who chose to honour my work. I am well aware of the honour bestowed on me and of the intellectual responsibility it carries. I also thank the members and corresponding members of the Institut de France, who keep alive an institution whose prestige rests as much on its history as on its daily work.

I am also very grateful to the staff of the Institut's library, where I spent several months while preparing the biography of Waldeck-Rousseau honoured today. The library holds Waldeck-Rousseau's private papers, a remarkably rich collection, later supplemented by a second, smaller collection deposited at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Finally, I thank everyone who has supported my research, discussed my hypotheses and contributed, directly or indirectly, to the interest I take in my work, I would almost say in my mission as a historian. First, at Sciences Po Paris (the Institut d'Études politiques de Paris), which trained me after university before welcoming me as a lecturer: Serge Berstein, whom I am glad to see here today, Nicolas Roussellier and Jean-Noël Jeanneney have been a lasting inspiration to me, through their historical approach and their scholarly rigour, which René Rémond also passed on. Nor do I forget all the work carried out within the Comité d'histoire parlementaire et politique (CHPP), then chaired by Professor Jean Garrigues.

Next, at the Catholic University of Lille, where I now serve as Professor of Contemporary History, as Vice-Dean of Faculty and as Special Adviser to its President-Rector, I would particularly like to thank Patrick Scauflaire and his chief of staff, Denis Vinckier, both of whom are with us this evening.

I would like to greet the representatives of the Waldeck-Rousseau family, Mrs Arcelin and her son, and thank them for being here today.

My thanks go to CNRS Éditions for supporting this project and publishing this substantial book [582 pages, 1,200,000 characters], after doing the same for my earlier biography of Aristide Briand. Thank you, Mrs Gacoin, Managing Director, for being here this evening.

I would like to pay tribute here to the man I regard, in a way, as my master in the art of writing. I owe it to Laurent Theis that he guided me as my editor, with high standards, rigour, passion and loyalty. I owe him a great deal.

Lastly, a very big thank you to my family, especially my wife, Hélène, and my children, Rosalie and Anatole, who followed every step of the nine years it took to complete this book.

**Conclusion: Waldeck-Rousseau's Echo Today**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by recalling what makes Waldeck-Rousseau's action modern today. Committed to defending the Republic, after first thinking it through and then governing it, he never departed from at least three principles essential to governing the regime well. First, an ethic of power that always led him to view politics with detachment. His long correspondence with his mother shows this on page after page. He was probably attached to power only for the ability it gives to govern, not for any profit to be drawn from it! His Jansenist culture, his insistence that those who govern must be people of integrity, and his concern for effective decision-making firmly guided his conduct in office. His temperament, which was little inclined to join with others ("he who seemed alone, apart, walled up in his silence like a pike in its aspic," as Maurice Barrès put it), reinforced the image of a discreet man who respected the exercise of power.

The first disappointments came after the fall of Ferry in the spring of 1885, when the bitterness of power turned into "disgust" with politics: "The blindness and short-sightedness of the people in my party sicken me." Or, when Grévy was being pushed to resign, he declared: "The Chamber makes carnage of everything; that is what comes of letting this ferocious beast live." Or again, during the Boulanger affair: "The disorder is general, and politics whirls about like a saraband."

This disinterestedness and this critical demand on a regime he nonetheless cherished would make him the President of the Council to whom the country turned in the troubles of 1899. "When we saw him come to power," said his minister Georges Leygues, "with his quiet courage and his nonchalant elegance, this man who for so many years had shied away from power, we suddenly felt reassured." In the making of laws, the indispensable instrument of decision, he stood out as a great jurist, always seeking good government.

Hence his distinctive art of governing, the second lesson for our own time: his mastery of parliamentary procedure and his precise use of it, combined with the building of parliamentary majorities, which made him a man of compromise. He applied it first to the social question, which he used to regenerate the Republic, and then to the secular question, which in 1901 allowed the regime to achieve real stability and to involve citizens widely in its culture, its ideals and its practice. As minister and as President of the Council, he showed how much courage it took to govern as a moderate, he for whom power mattered only for the opportunities it offers to shape the destiny of men. On 18 October 1904, in his funeral oration, the President of the Senate, Armand Fallières, said what mattered most: "Waldeck-Rousseau showed how much confidence a statesman truly worthy of the name can inspire when a clear view of things is joined by a sense of duty and a determination to undertake nothing without the resolve to see it through." Here again, there is something of Guizot in Waldeck-Rousseau.

And so, ladies and gentlemen, receiving the Guizot Prize of the Institut is also an invitation to carry on a task: that of understanding human societies over the long term, shedding light on how they change, and giving future generations the means to question their own history.

Thank you.

Christophe Bellon