The failings of the Directory explain Napoleon’s rise to power. How far do you agree?

Cambridge International AS/A Level – May/June 2017
European Option: Modern Europe, 1789-1917
Syllabus 9389
Paper 21

The failings of the Directory can be seen as one of the main reasons for Napoleon’s rise to power in 1799. The Directory was set up in 1795 and was a 5 member committee. It governed France for four years until Napoleon overthrew it. The French economy was continually at crisis during the time the Directory was in power. There was a lack of currency and the treasury was bankrupt during the start of its rule. They stopped printing assignats, the currency of the day, which caused prices to rise and wages to fall leading to a downturn in the French economy. They also were unable to control religious conflicts throughout France. The four years of their rule was a time of constant upheaval and problems with law and order. The French people were tired of being forced to pay taxes to help France fight in the many futile expensive foreign wars. By 1799 the people had lost trust in the Directory as they believed that it was inefficient and corrupt. This is due to the director fixing the elections to favour themselves. Moreover, the Directory lost a lot of popularity with the people of France as it had previously failed in several foreign campaigns. Due to this it was seen as extremely weak this gave Napoleon the perfect moment to overthrow the Directory and take power for himself.

Napoleon’s political connections were a key reason that helped him rise to power in 1799. He had many connections and close personal relationships with leaders and key figures involved in the Revolution. Due to this he was brought closer to politicians and revolutionary leaders such as Robespierre, and Barras who was a director. As he got to know them, it allowed him to find ways to exploit their weaknesses and introduce him into the political world which helped his rise to power. Furthermore, Napoleon also learned new skills of organising and addressing political meetings which helped him become a more able politician who could control his people. He learned these skills from his connections that made him attend most revolutionary rallies. His association with powerful leaders and people won him support from Abbey Sieyes, a successful General in the army, member of the clergy and member of the directory. Abbey Sieyes would later become pivotal in helping Napoleon. The military coup of 1799 would bring an end Directory and an end to the ten long years of revolution.

Napoleon’s pure luck should not be overlooked in his rise to power. Napoleon was born on the Mediterranean island of Corsica. The island was previously governed by Italy but a year before Napoleon’s birth was annexed to France. This therefore allowed him to be a Frenchman by birth and set him on course to being a general in the French army.