Picquart finally obtains Boisdeffre’s permission to submit his findings on Esterhazy to Billot. Billot recommends that Picquart continue his investigation to obtain more substantial evidence but should not inform Prime Minister Jules Méline or the Cabinet.38

Sept 11
Deputy André Castelin publicly announces his intention to question Méline in the Chamber on the Government’s attitude towards the Dreyfus case.39 (v. 13 and 18 Nov 1896)

Sept 14
Cassagnac, editor of L’Autorité, publishes his article entitled ‘Le doute’ (‘Doubt’), calling into question the guilt of Dreyfus and the infallibility of military courts. It suggests that a judicial error may have been committed: ‘[We must ask ourselves] If despite all the precautions that were put in place, despite the honour and patriotism of the judges, is there is not on Devil’s Island an innocent man suffering an agony of superhuman moral torture. This doubt alone is terrifying.’40

Revelations by L’Éclair

L’Éclair publishes a second anonymous article, ‘Le traître; la culpabilité de Dreyfus démontrée par le dossier’ (‘The Traitor; The Guilt of Dreyfus demonstrated by the Dossier’).41 The generally well-informed article is hostile; it gives detailed information, some false, concerning the bordereau and his arrest and investigation. For the first time a reference is made publicly to the secret transmission of Ce canaille de D. to the Court. Significantly, the phrase ‘Ce canaille de D.’ (‘This scoundrel D.’) was altered to ‘this animal Dreyfus’, either deliberately or in error.42

The Gonse–Picquart conflict

Sept 15
Gonse returns to Paris and receives Picquart, who suggests taking steps against L’Éclair. Gonse disagrees: this is not his responsibility, but that of Billot or Boisdeffre (both of whom are on manoeuvres in the Charente). The meeting becomes tense. Gonse exclaims: ‘What does it matter to you if this Jew is on Devil’s Island?’ When Picquart insists that Dreyfus may be innocent, Gonse remarks: ‘If you say nothing, no one will know about it.’ Appalled, Picquart ends the conversation, exclaiming: ‘General, what you are saying is abominable; I do not know what I will do but I shall not take this secret to my grave.’43

Sept 16
Gonse asks Picquart how he proposes to deal with Esterhazy. He rejects Picquart’s suggestion that Esterhazy be called into the Ministry of War for questioning, believing there is insufficient evidence against him. (In his opinion the petit bleu was not significant as it was not sent through the post.) However, subject to Boisdeffre’s approval, Gonse accepts a plan to put Esterhazy to the test by sending him a telegram, allegedly from Schwartzkoppen, calling him to a meeting.44 Boisdeffre agrees to this, but insists that Picquart obtain Billot’s approval. Billot refuses.45