

Do You Speak the Language of Moliere?

by Michael Curtis



In the history of France, politics and language have often been intertwined. In the last few months, the political use of language has been shown in a new form.

A number of French regions, including Paris, have passed rules obliging workers on publicly funded building sites to speak French as their working language. These regions are run by the conservative party, Les Republicans, the party of Francois Fillon, one of the leading candidates in the presidential election. The rule, the Moliere clause, is ostensibly based on language, but in reality it is a political tactic, a call to remove foreign workers and replace them with French workers.

Politically, it is an appeal by the Republicans to pander to voters who might be thinking of voting for the rival Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Front. The two rivals and other candidates are in the midst of coping with the problems of French identity, national sovereignty, political and economic relations with the European Union and the outside world, and above all immigration and threats of terrorism.

For a while in the months of 2016, American voters in primaries of the Republican party were bemused by the abundant choice of 17 candidates. In similar fashion French voters for the first round of the presidential election on April 23, 2017 are bewildered if not bewitched by the choice of 11 contenders representing a wide range of opinions, and most of whom are likely to get less than 1% of the total poll.

French politics are always intriguing, sometimes exciting and turbulent. Perhaps today it has not reached the level, the heights of the 18th century revolutionary turbulence when the monarchy was ended and replaced by the Republic, and when rival forces, Girondins, Jacobins and Montagnards, disputed and killed each other. Mighty figures, Brissot, Danton, Marat, Robespierre, Saint-Just, experienced or evaded execution, and the Committee of Public Safety of 11 members controlled life and death until Thermidor, July 26, 1794.

The Revolution among so many other things gave us a new term "terrorism" to describe an unpleasant part of political behavior. On August 28, 1794 Jean-Lambert Tallien in criticizing the behavior of Robespierre introduced for the first time the word "terror" into discussion, spoke of it as "a habitual, general shiver, an external shiver that affects the most hidden feelings."

Indeed, France is still divided over the Revolution and the "true" Robespierre. Was he an 18th century version of Stalin or Hitler, or the champion of popular sovereignty? Was he a secular saint or a bloody tyrant, a man who was once

“incorruptible” and became the ideologist of terrorism? Disagreement exists today when the municipal council of Paris in 2011 refused to name a street in the capital as “Robespierre.” Yet, one of the present presidential candidates Jean-Luc Melenchon is heralded by some as the “inheritor” of Robespierre.

One would have thought that stability in France had come and would continue with the creation by Charles de Gaulle of the 5th Republic in 1958. The virtual repudiation today of traditional political parties and establishment figures such as Francois Hollande, Manuel Valls, and Nicolas Sarkozy, shows that consensus on the nature of France is still lacking. Nevertheless, the present presidential candidates echo, to some extent and in different ways, de Gaulle’s major concern.

This concern was de Gaulle’s nationalist standpoint that he expressed clearly in a letter of March 7, 1966 to President Lyndon Johnson, concerning French withdrawal from participation in the integrated command of NATO and would no longer put French forces at the disposal of NATO. France, de Gaulle said, “intends to recover in her territory the full exercise of her sovereignty.”

The present presidential candidates may not accept all of de Gaulle’s perspectives: his advocacy of a powerful presidency, his advocacy of a dirigiste state control of the economy, or his ambiguous feeling towards the United States. But they agree with his insistence on French independence, on national sovereignty, and on control of French borders, though prepared to making concessions as required by political necessity.

De Gaulle had shown this by withdrawing French troops and naval forces from NATO command, though they remained as part of NATO, by refusing to allow foreign nuclear arms on French soil, and by arguing for an independent nuclear force instead of a multilateral one.

There are similarities between past and present in a number of ways. After de Gaulle took power, opposition parties were weakened for a time. Today, the traditional right and left parties have virtually disappeared as important political factors, the center is not holding, and the establishment is regarded as inept. Present politicians are not concerned, as de Gaulle was, with an independent nuclear force, but many of them are preoccupied with three other factors: national independence as echoed by criticism of the European Union; limiting or ending immigration; dealing with the Muslim population in France.

France faces a crossroad because of the dramatic change in its population resulting from the immigration of Muslims. Since 1967 the proportion of Muslims has increased from 2 % of the population to 9%, about 6 million out of the total 67 million population. Figures show that the younger the population in an area, the higher the proportion of Muslims.

One estimate of the population in Marseilles is that Muslims account for 25% of the local youth. In a country that is officially laic, Muslims are more religious than the rest of the population: about 42% of them confess to being "strictly religious," and want to propagate the faith. France is disturbed by two facts: more than 2000 Muslims in the country left to join ISIS; and more than 200 French citizens were killed by Islamic jihadists.

One consequence is that the candidates to different degrees but especially the FN, with its history of antisemitism, and candidate Le Pen while expressing their concern about Muslims and immigrants, are appealing to the Jewish population and arguing they plan to protect Jews against Islamic fundamentalism.

It is a sign of the tumult in French politics that the FN, founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen who has been convicted for Holocaust denial and antisemitic incitement, is being

supported by the Union of French Jewish Patriots, founded by Michel Thooris who is a member of the Central Board of FN. His argument is that Islamist terror attacks form the main threat to Jews in France.