

# Ending Discrimination in France

by Michael Curtis



Fairy tales can come true, it has happened to those who are young at heart. That may help explain why a new generation is arising in European politics, if not the surfacing of a comprehensive cult of youth. The 31 year old Sebastian Kurz is prime minister in Austria, the 39 year old Juri Ratas is PM of Estonia, the 39 year old Leo Varadkar is Taoiseach of Ireland, the 43 year old Alexis Tsipras is PM of Greece, and the 43 year old Matteo Renzi was PM of Italy, 2017-March 2018. Above all there is Emmanuel Macron, the 40 year old President of France.

Now that German Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU party did poorly in the September 2017 parliamentary election, getting only 32.9% of the vote, a loss of 8.6%, and that she was only able to form a government in March 2018, the self-confident and ambitious Macron appears as the new leading figure not

only in France but laying claim to be the diplomatic and political leader of Europe. During the presidential election campaign he jokingly declared himself "Jupiterian" and in power has been mocked by critics as the new incarnation of the Sun King, a reference to Louis XIV, the powerful 16-17th century monarch.

Macron, who is meeting President Donald Trump in the White House on April 24, 2018 to discuss international affairs, especially Iran's nuclear program, is demonstrating leadership in a number of ways: policies in internal French affairs; a prominent role in if not yet leadership of the European Union; and dealing with Islamist extremism and the disease of antisemitism.

In framing French internal policy Macron does not have unchecked authority though about 60% of the National Assembly are favorable to his party, La Republique en Marche. He has introduced proposals on a variety of issues: extending Sunday trading; supporting Uber against the taxi lobby; changing conditions for the baccaulariat examination; trying to limit protected entities' undue privileges; increased tax on pensions, cutting the speed on major roads to 80 km. ( 50 miles), to reduce accidents. Many of the proposals focus on reform of the French Labor Code which is to be changed in order to give greater employment flexibility to employers, reduce unemployment, and revitalize the French economy.

Important in this is the catalyst for reform of SNCF, the railroad system which has protected the job status of train workers who are hired for life, can retire at age 52, get free family travel and pensions. The SNCF, formerly linked to the Communist party, has a debt of 46 billion euros.

Not surprisingly, the proposed reforms have been resisted, to a considerable degree by those wanting to maintain their present benefits. Though unions have weakened in France since 1995 they are now defending existing privileges. Macron's

proposals have been greeted with strikes of rail workers, air traffic controllers, teachers. Most TGV trains and the Paris metro stopped running for a while. Students at the elite prestigious Sciences Po college occupied the building. Reality, as former president Francois Holland remarked, does not bend to Macron's will.

Macron has wider concerns and ambitions to influence European policy. In a number of speeches he has warned of the squalls of globalization, nativism, and populism. Consequently he calls for a strong European role. On April 17, 2018 at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, Macron declared, "I want to take the firm choice to defend democracy, to defend Europe's unique identity in face of growing authoritarianism and nationalism."

Without specifically mentioning the obvious suspects, Viktor Orban, now in his fourth term of office as prime minister of Hungary or Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the polarizing leader of the Law and Justice party in Poland, and the increase in support, almost 50%, for anti-establishment parties in Italy in the parliamentary election of March 4, 2018, Macron declared that democracy in Europe was not consigned to impotence. He drew on an interesting parallel in urging not to forget the European past: "I don't want to belong to a generation of sleepwalkers that has forgotten its past." This was an allusion to the long and complex trilogy *The Sleepwalkers* by the Austrian writer Hermann Broch about the deterioration of values, and tension between older and emerging ethical systems before World War I.

Macron warned of the increasing fascination in Europe with illiberalism and populist authoritarianism. Europe must turn away from selfish nationalism. What was needed was not authoritarian democracy but the authority of democracy.

Calling for closer integration of the EU, Macron proposed controversial technical changes: reform of the eurozone financial structure; attention to the banking union; common

deposit insurance scheme funded by all European banks; a EU fund able to manage sovereign bail out programs; and a much larger EU budget.

Macron has promised to lead in the fight against the “scourge” of antisemitism in France wherever it surfaces in the street or on line. According to official figures, antisemitic violence in France increased by 26% in 2017 and criminal damage to Jewish places of worship and burial increased by 22%. France has been the scene of too many anti-Jewish atrocities. In January-February 2006, the 23 year old Ilan Halimi, French born Jew of Moroccan ancestry was abducted and tortured by a Muslim group, the Gang of Barbarians, and then died. In March 2012, the Ozar HaTorah school in Toulouse was attacked and three children and a rabbi were killed by a jihadist who has already murdered three French soldiers.

On April 4, 2017 Sarah Halimi, 65 year old retired physician, Orthodox Jew, living in the Belleville district of Paris, was beaten and thrown out of the window to her death by a native of Mali who shouted Allah Akbar. Most recently, on March 23, 2018 the 85 year old Mireille Knell, who narrowly escaped the Vel d’Hiv roundup in Paris on July 16-17 1942, and fled to Portugal, was stabbed repeatedly in the throat before being set on fire by Muslim individuals . Islamist atrocities led between 2014-16 to more than 20,000 French Jews leaving France.

These events have led to Macron’s pledge to provide protection for Jewish schools, synagogues, and other Jewish sites. In view of the atrocities committed by Muslims, they have also led to a “deradicalization” program. There is no magic formula for deradicalization, but Macron and his government have made various proposals to prevent the spread of Islamist extremism in prisons, schools, mosques, and Islamic centers. High among them is the effort to stop Islamist extremism from flourishing in prisons which have influenced jihadists. Currently, 512 people are in prison for terrorist offences. The effort will

mean separating prisoners from radicalized inmates.

There are also plans for centers that will attempt to reintegrate Islamist radicals referred by French courts, and for a wide effort to get internet platforms to remove content that feeds extremism, tighter regulation of private Islamic schools, and reassigning of public servants who show signs of radicalization.

It is encouraging that France is implementing its policy of increased surveillance of Muslim clerics accused of hate speech and inciting violence. Before Macron became president, more than 90 Muslim clerics and radicals had been expelled from France.

It is noteworthy that on April 20, 2018 France expelled Imam el Hedi Doudi based in the as-Sounna mosque in Marseille, to Algeria. France is fortunate to have got rid of a bigot who provoked discrimination, hatred, and violence, and who preached that Jews are "unclean, the brothers of monkeys and pigs."

In view of these determined efforts to eliminate discrimination and violence it's gratifying to recognize and appreciate the best part, that Emmanuel Macron is among the very young at heart.