

France is Still Divided

by Michael Curtis



According to Julius Caesar, in first century B.C., Gaul was divided into three parts, though it was probably more accurate to say that all Gaul was at that time divided into five parts. Differences still exist about the origins of France, but generally speaking, the beginning of modern France is seen with the emergence of the Kingdom of France in 987 under Hugh Capet, 987-996, who made Paris the power center of the country. He was the first of 14 Capetian kings of a people who regard the Gauls as their ancestors, and their legendary hero Vercingetorix who united the Gauls in revolt against Roman control.

The national myth often rests on shaky foundations. Is France the eldest daughter of the church? Certainly, Notre Dame, started in 1187 and completed a century later, though it has had frequent small changes, was quickly understood as the center of international gothic with its perfect form and style, and its famed gargoyles, flying buttresses, and stained glass rose windows. It is one of the symbols not just of Paris but of the whole country. Notre Dame was nationalized in November 1789 and is the property of the French state, though its use for religious purposes has been returned to the

Catholic Church. Notre Dame therefore is maintained at the expense of the State, mostly by the Ministry of Culture.

Notre Dame has played a conspicuous role in French life. Napoleon was crowned Emperor there in 1804, and a memorial service for Charles de Gaulle took place there on November 12, 1970. It is a great place of worship and seen as a symbol of peace, but it is also a major tourist attraction, the most visited French monument after the Louvre, with 13 million visitors a year. The whole country, indeed the whole world, was traumatized by the event, apparently a tragic accident, on April 15, 2019 when the roof caught fire and caused damage that may be irreparable, though President Emmanuel Macron has vowed it will be restored, irrespective of the cost and within 5 years.

The interesting thing is the deep concern that a church, though a Gothic jewel, should have in a secularized country. According to Article 2 of the October 1958 Constitution, France is an "indivisible, secular, democratic, and social republic," a modern version of the republican slogan adopted during the days of revolution in 1792. All the main symbols of French pride are political and or military: The main national holiday, July 14 commemorates the storming of the Bastille; the tricolor flag, the motto, Liberty Equality, Fraternity; the national anthem, the Marsellaise written after the declaration of war against Austria, for the Rhine Army of revolutionary France; the personification of the country, bare-breasted Marianne, a national symbol displayed through the country who in recent years, has taken on, since Brigitte Bardot, the visage of well known celebrities.

In spite of the respect and love exhibited by countless people after the tragic fire at Notre Dame, France is not a Christian country, nor a united one. The struggle between church and state continued through the 19th century until the 1905 Law separated them, and church property was confiscated. This is a

law of separation, not discrimination, neutral to all religion, and tolerant to all. Reflecting the cultural diversity of France, the law and current practice rests on the principle of laicite, which however differs in interpretation as on the issue of wearing religious symbols in state schools.

However, religion today, apart from the issue of immigration of Muslim Arabs, is not as important or divisive as social and economic ones. President Macron paid fulsome tribute to Notre Dame: "It is our history, it is our literature, it is our imagery. It's the place where we live our greatest moments, from wars, to pandemics, to liberations." But he is faced with a number of issues that divide the country.

Macron is a pluralist rather than a populist. His misfortune is to be confronted by the gilets jaunes, yellow vests, the grassroots movement that began on October 18, 2018, originally motivated by government plans to increase fuel prices. For 24 subsequent weeks thousands have demonstrated in streets in Paris and other cities, blocking roads and fuel depots, and damaging shops and other property, smashing windows, burning cars, using violence against the police. Even on the annual May Day, May 1, 2019 celebrations, thousands of yellow vests took to the street to demonstrate. The protestors, slowly aligning themselves with France's old leftist organizations, have adopted various formulas: they are underpaid, overtaxed, want a higher minimum wage, more direct democracy, lower taxes but restore the tax on wealth, increase the public sector.

The supposed objective of the yellow vests is to reduce elitism in France, though the paradox is that they are now already a symbol of France.

Macron has been unable to end the demonstrations and the violence. He suggested a great national debate, 10,000 local debates, though the danger of this is the process might raise too many grievances, reminding the country of the unhappy past

experience when a similar set of grievances led to the *cahiers de doléances* in 1789 which galvanized a spirit of insurrection and the French Revolution.

So far, the record of Macron is mixed, but so is that of divided France. The French work fewer hours than the OECD average, 14 hours less than the average U.S. figure. France has a higher than average share, 82%, of full time employees. The working week is 3 hours shorter than in the U.S. or UK. Its high productivity rate is countered by high unemployment.

Macron remains a puzzling, polarizing figure. He has good sensible ideas on economic and political reforms in France. He is an internationalist, an advocate of deeper EU integration and global governance, a severe critic of British Brexit policy. On a platform of freedom, protection, progress he has called for more border controls, higher taxes for global tech companies, a EU wide minimum wage, and a European innovation council to fund business investment.

He is also an elitist, overconfident, the youngest French president ever, accused of hubris. He is essentially a part of the French meritocratic elite, a brilliant technocrat, investment banker, millionaire. He resurrected the Palace of Versailles, seat of monarchy, as the place for summits. For a number of reasons, he has also been accused of lack of concern for civil liberties. In October 2017, an anti-terrorism law increased the power given to police forces. In February 2018, an immigration law weakened the rights of migrants and asylum seekers.

Macron, the young man in a hurry, has slowed down, now at 41 he is confronting at least four problems, social, territorial, economic, and democratic. He remains ambitious, as his proposal to criminalize some criticism of Israel as a form of hate speech, and his partnership with Egypt worth millions of euros, show. He is also forthright with his attack on far-right nationalists who he called anger mongers backed by fake

news.

Macron's immediate comment on the Notre Dame tragedy was to call on the nation to unite and rally the country, to rebuild a society of equal opportunity and national excellence. Yet, Macron has been criticized for lack of emotion and connection with people. An interesting test may come over Macron's proposal to close down or radically change the prestigious ENA, prestigious college that trains public servants, Macron is himself a graduate as are his prime minister, finance and defense ministers, and six of his top advisers. Will any proposed change satisfy the yellow vests, and reduce the gap between the ruling French elite and the workers of France?