

The Center Will Hold in France

by Michael Curtis



French electors have sent a message to traditional political parties, we can get along without you very well. Instead, the country in the second round of voting on May 7, 2017 for president of France has a choice between two outsiders, one a Europhile, the other a Eurosceptic, battling for the prize. Some desperate citizens pondering the choice wonder who would the 15th century Joan of Arc support as the personification of France as General Charles de Gaulle had done fifty years ago. For whom will they vote or will they abstain?

In the first round of voting on April 23, 2017, France witnessed the emergence, familiar in some European elections in Hungary, Poland, Denmark, and to some extent in the UK and the US, of two issues. One was registration of discontent with the existing establishment, elites, globalization, and immigration, and emphasis on nationalism. The other is perception that the era of ideological politics may be over.

The striking phenomenon in the complex result of April 23, with 27% voting for left candidates, 48% for right wing

candidates, and others unclassified, is the break with French traditional voting as the vote for mainstream party candidates was reduced to only a quarter of the total. The traditional mainstream left and right candidates had won 56% of the vote in the first round of the presidential election in 2012. In 2017 the mainstream conservative Francois Fillon (Les Republicains) got 19.9%, while the Socialist Leo Hamon got only 6.3%. The energetic far left populist Jean-Luc Melancon (*Les Insoumis* or Unsubmissive Free) got 19.6%, and did well in the Paris banlieue of Seine-Saint-Denis.

The “outsiders” in April 2017 got 45% between them. The result was particularly disappointing for the French Socialist Party that was reformed at the Epinay Congress in June 1971 by integrating left wing republican groups, leading to the ascendancy of the French left for almost a quarter of a century.

The choice for electors is therefore between Emmanuel Macron, the pro-business, socially liberal, Europeanist, the man who has never held elected office and formed his own political party, who got 24% of the vote, and Marine Le Pen, the president of the far right Front National (FN) who got 21.3%. The conventional wisdom is that Macron will win since none of the unsuccessful candidates have urged support for Le Pen on May 7. Recognizing this, to broaden her support, Le Pen stepped down as president of FN to portray herself as a patriotic candidate for all the French, above partisan considerations.

But Le Pen did not help her cause by the choice of an interim replacement as leader of the party. First the nominee was Jean-Francois Jalkh, a vice president of the party, who in an interview in 2005 had questioned the historical fact of the use of Zyklon B gas by Nazi Germany to exterminate Jews. He aggravated the situation by denying he had made the comment that from a technical point of view it is impossible to use Zyklon in mass exterminations since it takes several days to

decontaminate a space where the gas has been used. He is reported to have said the use of gas chambers by Nazi Germany was "technically impossible." He also attended a mass in a Paris church for Marshal Petain, head of the Vichy regime. After criticism, he turned down the role as party leader. In his place, another FN vice president Steve Briois, mayor of Henin-Beaumont has been chosen. The party still suffers from "issues of democratic hygiene."

Though the US and French presidential elections are not exactly comparable, it is noticeable that, in similar fashion to the voting for Donald Trump, major cities did not vote for Le Pen: she obtained 5% in Paris, 8% in Bordeaux, 9% in Lyon. She won a number of Departments, (regions) gaining much of the working class vote, but not the urban, well educated, pro-European, areas.

Le Pen had done better than she did in 2012, by 1.2 million more votes, but less well than her party had done in recent years when the FN obtained 25.2% in Departmental elections, and 27.3% in regional elections. Apparently, she did not benefit from revulsion against the terrorist attack in the Champs Elysees, the heart of Paris, three days before the first round, when one policeman was killed and three others injured. ISIS acknowledged responsibility.

Le Pen immediately denounced Islamism as "a monstrous totalitarian ideology that has declared war on our nation, on reason, on civilization." She called once again for border checks, arresting all suspects on France's terror watch list, deporting foreign suspects, and ending French citizenship for dual nationals. She adheres to her program: priority for French nationals in jobs, housing, and welfare; reduce or end immigration; tax foreign workers and imports, and full sovereignty for France.

There is another interesting parallel with the 2016 US presidential election. Allegations have been made, though so

far none proved, that Russia interfered by supporting Donald Trump. The Macron camp has banned two Russian news outlets, Sputnik news agency, and RT TV channel from his events, because he claims they are undermining his campaign by issuing propaganda, fake news, and false information against him. They may be responsible for the allegations that Macron is a puppet of US political and financial elites, and for rumors of a gay relationship. Not coincidentally, Le Pen was received by President Putin in the Kremlin in March 2017.

To general surprise, Emmanuel Macron, an attractive 39 year old, personable and empathetic, from an upper middle class professional family, emerged as a formidable candidate. He was not completely unknown having been a former banker working for Rothschild Bank in Paris, and serving for about a year and a half as a senior advisor and economic minister in the Hollande administration. But he was not yet a familiar or popular figure, nor did he have a natural constituency to support him. He refers to himself as neither left nor right nor as a centrist, but as someone of the left open to ideas of the right. He is politically untested and formed his own group En Marche! (let's go), and appeared as a pro-Europeanist.

Macron's main advantage has been luck in his opponents. The more well-known Francois Fillon, the leading conservative candidate at one point, lost strength because of the accusations against him of embezzling parliamentary funds by paying his wife for fake jobs at which she did little or nothing. Melenchon, a somewhat more jovial version of Britain's Jeremy Corbyn, is pro-Palestinian. Both the Socialist and the Republican vote collapsed. President Hollande decided not to run again for president, and the moderate Alain Juppe was defeated in the primary race of the conservatives.

Macron's political opinions were and are still not well known, and he has quoted Albert Camus, "the task of our generation is preventing the world from coming undone." But his unusual

marital situation received considerable attention. As a 15 year old he fell in love with his married school drama teacher, twenty four years older. Now 39, Macron is married to the 64 year old Brigitte, a former French literature and Latin teacher who worked in Jesuit schools.

What is important is that Macron, if elected President, will be the youngest French leader since Napoleon. Without a substantial political party to support him, he will have a legislative problem, though he has stated that if elected his group will run candidates at the next parliamentary National Assembly election in June 2017 for all the 577 constituencies.

The choice may be difficult for some electors on May 7, but one group of electors, French Jews, has a clear choice, even though a small number voted for Le Pen, as 13% had done in 2012. Le Pen has been trying to disassociate herself from the antisemitism prevalent among some members of her party, especially her father Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of her party. Still, her comments on the Holocaust, her called for banning of wearing the kippah, and other religious objects, in public, and her proposal that French nationals cannot have an Israeli passport suggest her disassociation may be more politically strategic than moral principle.

However, the Jewish predicament remains though anxiety has slightly improved. The numbers of Jews leaving France for Israel has declined. In 2016 it was 5,000 compared with 8,000 in 2015, and 7,000 in 2014. The indiscriminate terrorist attacks in various parts of France and in Paris suggest that Jews are not the only group targeted. Jews are in as much danger in the Galeries Lafayettees as in the area in which Hyper Cacher, the kosher grocery store attacked by terrorists in January 2015, is located. Nevertheless, for Jews Macron is part of the "republican front," not a candidate of hate.