

The Europeans are smug as ever, but have less and less reason to be

by Conrad Black



I have just returned from Europe, where there has been an irritating outburst of complacency over recent political events there, from quarters with no right to indulge in it. The huge sigh of pan-European relief over the first round of the French election is completely unjustified. The only candidate who looked and sounded like a president of the French Republic, François Fillon, came third, because of unproved and politically motivated allegations of improper payments to his Welsh wife. The front runner is an untried, practically unknown, glib 39-year-old who claims to be a reformed socialist, Emanuel Macron. He has never been a political candidate before and is married to his former schoolteacher, 24 years his senior.

Only two points behind him, and heading into the run-off

election in two weeks of the two top candidates, is the National Front leader Marine Le Pen, a podgy and not particularly well-spoken woman who looks and sounds like the overbearing wife of a village butcher. On Sunday night, the French and foreign media made much of the fact that she ran only slightly ahead of her father Jean Marie Le Pen when he stood against President Jacques Chirac 15 years ago. But in 2002, Chirac quintupled his vote on the second ballot. He was no world beater, but was the incumbent president, had twice been premier, and a successful mayor of Paris (and had scooped a good deal more public money than Fillon's wife is claimed to have done).

Marine Le Pen expelled her father from the party he founded for disparaging the Holocaust (in which several hundred thousand French perished) when he was 87 years old, and she is not really much of an extremist herself. The great, rich nation of France is in an appalling condition of prolonged misgovernment and national decline, and Ms. Le Pen should take between 40 and 45 per cent of the vote next weekend. There is no reason for optimism that Macron, if elected, and with no party to run in the immediately following legislative elections, will fare any better than hapless François Hollande, who has festered unsuccessfully in the Elysee (presidential) Palace for the last five years.

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Last Sunday night was a sad television evening: the other presidential candidates were unrelievedly ludicrous, kooks most of them, with no physical presence and little forensic skill, and the quality of French news telecasters has plummeted along with the stature of the politicians. Few present with the magnificent, if often annoying, confidence of

the leading French media personalities of earlier times, and the noticeably diverse group speaks French indifferently, at best. There is nothing visible remaining of the drama, culture and theatricality of the first 40 years of the Fifth Republic under de Gaulle, Pompidou, Giscard d'Estaing, and Mitterand. De Gaulle resolved the centuries-long battle between monarchists and republicans by founding a monarchy and calling it a republic: the early presidents were, and seemed to be, elected kings. Sunday night looked and sounded more like a mayoral election in Quebec City.

It is one of the ironies of modern international politics that the French, one of the most avaricious, individualistic and imaginative peoples in the world, have been so seduced by a hopeless, inert, desiccated socialism. When Richelieu, otherwise one of the greatest statesmen in European history, imposed an absolute and centralized government in the 17th century, he almost aborted democracy and doomed France to a struggle ever since between an over-mighty state and revolutionary libertarianism.

The final outcome of this election is not a foregone conclusion and Le Pen has risen steadily in the polls and is now over 40 per cent against Macron. She wants out of the European Union and there is nothing good in any predictable results for the smug little cabal of anti-democratic and unaccountable gremlins in Brussels, who have already almost fumbled Britain out of the Euro-fantasy, to justify their self-satisfaction.

The British election, June 8, promises to be the greatest landslide in that country since Stanley Baldwin swept 470 MPs (out of 630) in 1931, and was then prevailed upon by King George V to prop up the amiable former Labour party leader Ramsay MacDonald, who had almost no support, as prime minister for four years. The current prime minister, Theresa May, is cautious and seems adequately competent. The opposition parties are fragmented and unfeasible. The Liberal Democrats,

now down to nine MPs, could get some support as an anti-Brexit party, but probably not many constituencies. The Scottish Nationalists, despite the usual boastful crowing of separatists (including in this country), will almost certainly lose some ground to the local Conservatives. May will have a strong mandate but enjoys limited public enthusiasm. Except for the ineffable Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, it is a humdrum government with little style or panache.

If Macron wins and Angela Merkel returns for a fourth term as German chancellor in the elections in September, though probably in another cumbrous grand coalition with the chief opposition party, the Social Democrats, they may bully Brussels into offering a two-tier Europe. This would be a common market with political integration only for those countries that wished it; a re-elected May government could conceivably accept that and sell it to the country.

Such an outcome would eventually produce a pantomime-horse Europe. The Grosse Deutschland of ancient Teutonic ambitions would emerge, but assembled by example and co-prosperity rather than by coercion as has been unsuccessfully attempted in the past. It would include the Balkan countries, Czechs, Austrians, and possibly the Dutch and probably the Poles. There would be a Mediterranean-tier led informally and with frequent comedic interludes by France. And the outliers would be led by Britain in its role going back to Wolsey's time of favouring different European powers successively with agile flexibility while oriented more to the English-speaking world across the seas.

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The long-running farce of Italian public life could also

imperil the coherence of Europe. The leading party in that country is now even more bizarre than some of the French political confections, and is led by a comedian barred from public office by previous misconduct, and has an obscenity as its rallying slogan. The Italians and Greeks have never managed a hard currency in 2,500 years, and are addicted to inflation to expand the money supply and maintain the public accounts.

The Germans have the opposite preoccupation: a phobia about unsound money, but a need for some monetary weaklings in the eurozone, to facilitate the export of German-engineered products, as long as the Berlin government doesn't become vulnerable to the domestic charge of bankrolling too many Mediterranean beach bums. This fissure between hard and soft currency countries, and Brussels' authoritarianism and unanswerability either to its chaotic and impotent European Parliament or to the major constituent governments, are the main problems of the Euro-project and there is no remedy in sight nor any personalities with the imagination and authority to have an obvious aptitude to put things right. The best believable scenario is some sort of two- or three-level evolution as described above. Such a result could occur in spontaneous stages, but not without a good many stressful and abrasive moments. (Canada has sent Stéphane Dion on a very uncertain mission as ambassador to the European Union.)

Europe is not under threat from Russia; Germany and the U.K. are fairly robust, and France will recover eventually. Italy always gets by, and the second echelon of European states – Spain, Poland, Netherlands, the Czechs, and Scandinavia – are doing fairly well. It is a tired but not mortally enervated continent. But the quick fix and instant return to world leadership of a united Europe was moonshine from the start, as de Gaulle and Margaret Thatcher foresaw.

As always, for better and worse, returning to Canada was a resumption of serenity.

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