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‘The Hollande presidency, 2012–14’ Ben Clift and Raymond Kuhn

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Special Issue: The Hollande Presidency, 2012–14. Guest Editors: Ben Clift and Raymond Kuhn

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This special issue examines selected aspects of French politics and policy during the first two years of François Hollande’s five-year presidential tenure. Hollande’s victory over Nicolas Sarkozy in the 2012 presidential election brought to an end a run of three straight defeats for Socialist candidates in these first-order electoral contests, with the previous victory going as far back as 1988 when François Mitterrand was returned for a second seven-year term. Hollande’s success was quickly followed by the election of a Socialist party majority in the National Assembly, with the parliamentary result, as in 2002 and 2007, confirming that of the presidential contest. Three periods of executive cohabitation, including the most recent (1997–2002) during which the Gaullist, Jacques Chirac, and the Socialist, Lionel Jospin, occupied the top two executive posts of president and prime minister respectively, have now faded into historical memory. Power-sharing between Right and Left at the apex of the national political system is no longer in vogue. As a result, since 2002 there has been a return to the practice of de facto presidential supremacy in both the executive branch and the political system as a whole.

Hollande’s victory in 2012: no remake of Mitterrand’s in 1981

Yet while after the presidential and parliamentary results Hollande and the Socialist party dominated the institutional framework of the Fifth Republic, the hopes for radical change that had accompanied the first Socialist presidential victory – that of Mitterrand in 1981 – were largely absent in 2012. Hollande may well have campaigned on the slogan ‘Le changement, c’est maintenant’ (Hollande 2012a) and even promised to ‘changer de destin’ (Hollande 2012b), but the expectations of change, whether in terms of ideological values or policy outputs, could not begin to compare with the situation of more than three

decades previously when Mitterrand's Socialist party had campaigned to 'changer la vie' (Parti socialiste 1972) and had won a huge parliamentary majority on the coattails of Mitterrand's presidential success.

It was not just that 1981 was the first time that the Left had ever won either a presidential or parliamentary election since the foundation of the Fifth Republic in 1958, even if the first alternation in power between Right and Left was undoubtedly a historic event. More importantly, when Mitterrand won the presidency, the mood of optimistic possibility was almost tangible. Although the long period of postwar economic growth had come to an end in the mid-1970s, Mitterrand's election seemed to herald a new era for France in which the values of the 1968 'events' would be translated into wide-ranging political, socio-economic and cultural change. The early months witnessed sweeping reforms: a wave of nationalisations, political decentralisation, improved rights for workers and the abolition of the death penalty among others.

Hollande's victory in 2012 could never hope to recreate the reformist buzz of 1981. France, Europe and the world were now very different. In 2012 neo-liberal economic ideas dominated thinking in most, if not all, western capitals and international financial institutions; the bipolar tension of the Cold War had been swept aside by the collapse of the Soviet Union (formally dissolved in 1991) and been replaced by globalisation, in which the United States was the dominant but declining power faced with the rise of China; successful reunification in 1990 and the relative strength of the German economy during Angela Merkel's chancellorship had seen the locus of power in a much-enlarged EU shift towards a resurgent Germany; France and the eurozone had not yet emerged from the negative impact on economic growth of the global banking crisis; French influence (political, diplomatic and cultural) in Europe and the world had waned (Morrison and Compagnon 2010); the novelty of the Left in power had worn off following three separate five-year periods of government (1981–86; 1988–93; 1997–2002); the French Communist party had ceased to be a major political force, with the result that the Socialist party now dominated electoral politics on the French Left; from its electoral breakthrough in the 1984 European election the extreme-right Front national (FN) had succeeded in 2002 in going through to the second round of a presidential contest; and at the personal level Hollande did not possess the mix of character traits, by no means all of them admirable, that had made Mitterrand such an enigmatic, intriguing and forceful political personality (Cole 1997; Short 2013). Indeed, for many voters it seemed that the main change effected by the 2012 result was to have gotten rid of the

incumbent; one of Hollande's principal strengths as a presidential candidate in 2012 was quite simply that he was not Sarkozy.

As a candidate Hollande also sought to play down electoral expectations. For the most part he fought a safety-first campaign, seeking to protect his early lead in the opinion polls (Kuhn 2013). Sarkozy's unpopularity with a large swathe of voters and the unwillingness of many who had voted for Marine Le Pen in the first round to transfer their support to him in the second sealed the fate of the incumbent. For Socialist voters the victory of Hollande was met as much with relief as enthusiasm. He was a successful candidate who for most of the Sarkozy presidency had not been expected to win the Socialist nomination, far less be elected president. In March 2009 an opinion poll in *Libération* had given Hollande a mere 3% of voting intentions in the 2011 Socialist primary (Chabert 2014, 106); in contrast until May 2011 the general expectation was that Dominique Strauss-Kahn would be the Socialist candidate and the likely future head of state. While Mitterrand had twice stood unsuccessfully for the presidency prior to 1981 and had cultivated his image as a *présidentiable* over many years, 2012 was Hollande's first attempt. Little wonder, perhaps, that the title of one account of Hollande's long campaign assessed his journey to the presidency, and perhaps his credentials for the function, with a note of surprise and even scepticism: *L'homme qui ne devait pas être président* (André and Rissouli 2012).

An uninteresting president?

As a subject of publishing interest Hollande has attracted nowhere near as much attention as did Sarkozy, who generated a vast amount of literature, both favourable and critical. A generally sympathetic biography of Hollande appeared just before the Socialist primary in 2011 (Raffy 2011) and was reissued in a slightly expanded version after his presidential victory (2012). As the long campaign came to an end Bugat (2012), Malouines (2012) and Pfaadt (2012) wrote about different aspects of Hollande's career, political views and closest colleagues. In addition, there were several of what French commentators call 'quick books' published very soon after his election victory (André and Rissouli 2012; Barotte and Schuck 2012; Estier 2012; Neumann 2012; Pouget and Delpuech 2012). These covered Hollande's campaign from a journalistic perspective, often within a chronological framework. The novelist Laurent Binet (2012) wrote an

account of Hollande's campaign based on privileged insider access, emulating what the novelist Yasmina Reza had done for Sarkozy in 2007 (Reza 2007).

Yet if one excludes studies of the former 'first lady', Valérie Trierweiler (Bouilhaguet and Jakubyszyn 2012; Greilsamer 2012), and accounts of his relations with his former partner and mother of their four children, Ségolène Royal (Cabana 2012; Degois 2014), books on Hollande since his accession to the presidency have been few and far between. Here the contrast with his predecessor is particularly marked, as several book-length studies of president Sarkozy were published to mark the first anniversary of his election and thereafter throughout his presidential term. Sarkozy – the man, the president, the political animal – fascinated observers in a way that Hollande has clearly not.

The indefatigable journalist Michèle Cotta (2012) produced a book that included some material on the early months of Hollande's presidential tenure, while Cécile Amar (2014) wrote an account of the first year and a half of his presidency, whose title – *Jusqu'ici tout va mal* – gives the reader the author's overarching argument in a nutshell. The thrust of two polemical works are also given away by the titles: *Allez-vous en, François Hollande!* by the right-wing journalist Dominique Jamet (2013) and *L'Enfumeur* by the economically liberal commentator Serge Federbusch (2013). Otherwise, however, the bookshelves are in the main remarkably bare. Instead, in 2013 and 2014 there seems to have been more publishing interest in a possible return of Sarkozy (Guénolé 2013; Paillé 2013; Bertrand 2014) and the challenges posed to the parties of both mainstream Left and Right by the ideas of Marine Le Pen (Kahn 2014; Ouraoui 2014; Perrineau 2014).

Does this comparative lack of publishers' interest in president Hollande reflect the uneventful nature of French politics over the two years since his election? The authors of the five articles grouped in this special issue would all argue otherwise. Hollande may not possess many of the personal traits that made some of his predecessors at the Elysée, notably General de Gaulle and Mitterrand, such striking leadership figures. Even his friends would have difficulty in describing him as charismatic or a powerful rhetorician: Hollande is no French-style Obama. Yet he is only the second president in the Fifth Republic to come from the ranks of the Left – and that in itself makes his presidency worthy of study. During his presidential term his government has had to wrestle with the need to reform important areas of the economy in order to boost growth and employment; the French military have intervened in a conflict against Islamist fighters in Mali; the

president has experienced historically low levels of popularity for a French head of state; the Socialist party has been roundly defeated in two mid-term elections and is going through yet another identity crisis; the mainstream Right has failed to present itself as a credible alternative party of government; and the extreme Right under the ‘detoxifying’ leadership of Marine Le Pen has further disturbed what it would regard as the cosy bipartite consensus of the ‘UMPS’ by winning the European election in May 2014¹. All of these aspects of Hollande’s presidential term to date are covered in this special issue.

Inevitably in an edited collection there are several areas which have had to be omitted or are only fleetingly touched on: the politics of the environment, the politics of gender (including Hollande’s record on parity), several areas of foreign and defence policy, education, the cultural realm and judicial policy, to name but a few. Two important policy areas that have played a prominent part in the political debate under president Hollande are dealt with in a companion special issue in the journal *French Politics* (Clift and Kuhn 2014): state reform and decentralisation (Cole 2014) and Franco-German economic relations within the framework of the European Union (Clift and Ryner 2014). While as guest editors we would make no claim for the comprehensiveness of this special issue, nonetheless we hope that it will help shed light on some of the most important elements of what president Hollande has (and has not) done, the reasons why (and why not), the impact of his decisions (and non-decisions) and the response (or lack of it) from other political actors.

Overview of the special issue

Hollande’s presidential leadership

In the first article Raymond Kuhn examines the first two years of François Hollande’s presidential term from a leadership perspective. Kuhn begins by looking at Hollande’s candidacy in the 2012 presidential election, where he argues that Hollande was a ‘lucky candidate’, first, because of the self-elimination of Dominique Strauss-Kahn from the Socialist primary contest and, second, due to the unpopularity of the incumbent that helped transform the election campaign into a pro/anti Sarkozy referendum. As president, Hollande has had to cope with the unpropitious context of France’s economic situation: low/no economic growth and a rise in unemployment. His popularity has suffered as a result. This is scarcely a new situation for a French president. Taking a longer time perspective than Kuhn does in his article, Grossman and Sauger (2014) argue in their

contribution in the *French Politics* special issue that unpopularity and disappointment have been the usual fate of presidents since the 1980s because of voter perception of economic policy failure. Hollande's unpopularity in 2012–14 is unusual in degree, not in kind.

Kuhn argues that the unfavourable economic context forms only a part of the explanation for the president's low scores in opinion polls. Hollande has also contributed to his own unpopularity because of ineffective leadership. In particular, he failed to grasp the scale of the economic situation in the early months of his tenure and so lost precious time in fully addressing the need for structural reforms and engaging in a persuasive pedagogic narrative. In addition, his public communication – an essential leadership quality in the era of mediatised politics – has been poor. His attempt to reassert his presidential leadership in the wake of the losses by the Socialist party in the 2014 municipal election carries its own risks. Hollande changed his prime minister, made a wide-sweeping government reshuffle, renewed his advisory team at the Elysée and brought in a new man to head up the Socialist party. If these changes fail to bring results, then Hollande will be further weakened; but if the new prime minister, Manuel Valls, succeeds in pushing through reform measures and these are seen to have a positive impact, then the danger for Hollande is that credit may go to the prime minister rather than to the president. In July 2014, with Hollande and Valls managing the same set of economic policies, Hollande's popularity stagnated at 18%, while Valls was at 45% (albeit down from 51% in June and 56% in May) (Ifop 2014).

The Socialist party

Political parties remain important in the political system of the Fifth Republic, despite its domination by the executive in general and the president in particular. A serious candidate with realistic aspirations to win the presidential election needs a party organisation to provide human, financial and logistical support, while a president needs a parliamentary majority to get legislation enacted. President Hollande has had a long and close relationship with the Socialist party, fulfilling the role of first secretary from 1997 to 2008, before winning the 2011 primary to become the party's candidate for the 2012 presidential election. The party, however, is not in good shape. Indeed in his article Gérard Grunberg argues that the party is undergoing a crisis that could have serious, long-term consequences for the party's unity and role as a party of government. While paying due attention to the defeats in the 2014 municipal and European elections,

Grunberg goes beyond these short-term events to place the contemporary crisis of the Socialist party within the context of the destabilisation of the French party system as a result of growing divisions on both left and right caused by the evolution of the European Union against the backdrop of recent financial and economic crises.

Grunberg argues that the traditional left/right cleavage that structures the functioning of the political system and the nature of party competition has been called into question by a different cleavage between supporters and opponents of European integration. The cross-cutting nature of these two cleavages will prevent the different forces of the French Left from uniting on a programme of government. Moreover, the Socialist party itself is seriously divided which makes the government's parliamentary base more fragile. Long-standing differences on economic policy have been deepened during Hollande's presidency because of the explicitly stated preference of the government in favour of a supply-side approach to economic reform. Grunberg's conclusion is that the French Socialist party may well have reached the end of a political cycle. It will have to make choices that it has put off for many years, with the risk of structural fragmentation. In turn, this threatens to set off an electoral and political decline that could ultimately deprive it of its status as a party of government.

The UMP and the Centre

Such a situation for the Socialist party ought to favour the electoral fortunes of the mainstream Right. In one of the 2014 elections this was indeed the case. The main party of opposition, l'Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP), led by Jean-François Copé did well in the municipal contest in March, gaining control of several large towns previously held by the Left. According to Knapp, in winning the municipal election the UMP (and the Centrists) benefited not only from the unpopularity of the Left in power, but also from its own (partial) reconstruction. The Centrists had reorganised, while the UMP had reaffirmed its right-wing programme and drawn strength from the opposition social movements such as the one that campaigned against gay marriage from the end of 2012 through to the early summer of 2013.

In contrast, however, the result of the European election in May demonstrated the limitations of this reconstruction. Their weak institutionalisation – what Knapp calls 'the original sin' of France's Right and centre-Right – left internal ideological differences and (above all) personal rivalries unchecked within both camps. In the case of the UMP these tensions were compounded by a series of financial scandals, one of which – Bygmalion

(*Le nouvel Observateur.fr* 2014) – led to Copé’s resignation from the party leadership immediately after the European election, which in effect removed him from the equation as a possible UMP candidate for the 2017 presidential election. At the heart of most of the accusations was former president Sarkozy. Yet his alleged implication in a series of scandals stretching over several years, both before becoming president and during his tenure at the Elysée, did not seem to reduce his appeal to UMP militants. In the summer of 2014 Sarkozy continued to enjoy significant levels of support among party activists as he planned a rematch against Hollande and sought to eliminate both former prime ministers Alain Juppé and François Fillon from the nomination race. Only his implication in a series of judicial investigations undermined the Sarkozy comeback, threatening even to derail it completely.

The Front national

Rarely in the history of the Fifth Republic have the two forces of mainstream Left and Right simultaneously seemed so bereft in terms of leadership, strategy, policy credibility and voter confidence as in the summer of 2014. In electoral terms the major beneficiary of the travails of the two main parties has been not Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Front de gauche, but rather Marine Le Pen’s Front national. In his article James Shields takes a long historical view of the evolution of the FN from the early 1970s up to the present day, subjecting to critical scrutiny Marine Le Pen’s claim to have detoxified the brand.

Using a conceptual framework based on the classic works on political parties of Giovanni Sartori and Robert Michels, Shields argues that for most of its existence the FN fitted the classic definition of an anti-system party, opposing the founding values, institutions and elites of the Fifth Republic. He then asks whether the ‘normalisation’ strategy of Marine Le Pen to integrate the party to the regime it once defied holds water. One of the main features of Shields’s contribution is the calling into question of the simple antithetical labels of ‘anti-system’ and ‘mainstream’ as applied to the ideological and policy evolution of the FN over more than 40 years. Not only has there been no straightforward linear process of moderation in the FN’s policy pronouncements during this period, but the applicability of the notion of ‘normalisation’ also varies across different policy fields, including the economy, immigration, Europe and attitudes towards Islam among others. Both process and outcome are more complex than might seem at first sight.

Through a detailed analysis of continuity and change in FN strategy and programmes, Shields presents a picture of a party torn between anti-system differentiation and institutional adaptation. He argues that the party has not undertaken the necessary moderation of its programme to substantiate any claim to have ‘cast out its demons’. The FN under the leadership of Marine Le Pen is not following a simple linear path of deradicalisation; instead it exhibits a combination of consistent, diminished *and* increasing radicalism across different policy areas. Shields concludes that the party still remains beyond the pale of Republican values, while also downplaying its impact on representative politics in contemporary France, notwithstanding the party’s claim after the 2014 European election to be the ‘premier parti de France’.

Hollande and Africa policy

Few would have thought in the immediate aftermath of Hollande’s election victory that Africa would feature so highly on the political agenda in the first year of his presidential term. The French intervention in Mali arguably represents one of the clearest successes of his presidency to date. In January 2013 in Operation Serval the French military undertook operations against Islamist militant fighters to retake territory in the north of the country. At the end of a short conflict the success of this mission was celebrated by Hollande on a visit to the capital Bamako where, clearly impressed by the strength of the popular welcome in the streets, he asserted that ‘je viens sans doute de vivre le plus beau jour de ma vie politique’ (*Libération.fr* 2013).

As the article by Tony Chafer reminds us, even after independence was obtained by its former African colonies, France continued to exercise economic, political and cultural influence in what it regarded as its ‘*pré carré*’. Many studies of France’s policy towards these independent African states have emphasised its imperialist aspects (*la Françafrique*), focusing on the frequently unsavoury nature of the relationship between ministers and officials at the Elysée and the Quai d’Orsay on the one hand and corrupt African political leaders and their entourages on the other.

Chafer seeks to move away from this rather one-dimensional, neo-colonial view of France’s Africa policy under Hollande. Rather than examining contemporary developments through the prism of national history, he uses International Relations literature to view them through the lens of geopolitics. This allows him to situate elements of change and continuity within a broad-ranging analytic framework, that allows for elements of multi-dimensional interdependence between France and African

states rather than simply focusing on an old-fashioned model based on domination and subjugation of the latter by the former.

Chafer examines three key aspects of Africa policy during Hollande's presidential tenure: security, partnership and trade. This tripartite focus allows him to analyse in turn, first, French military interventions in Africa, notably Operation Serval; second, French engagement with African regional organisations, including the Economic Community of West African States; and, finally, the significance of economic and trade links at a time of increased involvement in Africa by other leading international states, such as China, India and Turkey. With regard to France's economic involvement in the continent and the government's desire significantly to increase trade and investment, Chafer concludes that while some large French multinational companies like Bolloré and Bouygues have been long established in Africa, small and medium-sized firms have been less in evidence and they will need to increase their contribution if French commercial activity is to compete effectively in what has become an increasingly crowded marketplace.

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Dedication: In memory of David Goldey, 1936–2014

This special issue is dedicated to the memory of David Goldey, emeritus fellow of Lincoln College, University of Oxford, who died on 25 July 2014 as this volume was about to go to press. A specialist in European and American politics, David possessed above all a long-standing expertise in the history and politics of France. We were delighted that he was willing to chair one of the sessions at the 2013 conference and very grateful that he agreed to organise the pre-conference dinner at his college. David was a man who possessed a keen intelligence, breadth of knowledge and passion for French politics. Among many of the qualities that we shall miss are his insight, support, companionship, tolerance and good sense of humour. Adieu, cher collègue et cher ami.

Notes

- [1] The leader of the Front national, Marine Le Pen, pejoratively refers to what she regards as the objective alliance between the main parties of the Right (l'Union pour un Mouvement Populaire – UMP) and Left (Parti socialiste – PS) as the 'UMPS'.

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