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## **The Phantom Revolution. The Presidential and Parliamentary elections of 2017**

The results of both the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2017 in France grabbed the headlines around the world. In the April-May presidential elections, 39 year-old and previously unelected Emmanuel Macron swept to power, supported by a party that was only one year old and that claimed to be 'above left and right'. He put together a government made up of individuals from both centre-right and centre-left, alongside non-party members, with a Prime Minister from the centre-right Les Républicains. Macron immediately began implementing change, by decree, including relaxation of labour laws and measures to combat corruption in politics. For the first time under the Fifth Republic, neither of the two presidential candidates for the established parties of government - the Parti socialiste and Les Républicains - had gone through to the second round, instead of which there was a run-off between Macron and Marine Le Pen for the extreme right Front national. In the parliamentary elections in June, Macron's party emerged with an absolute majority of seats in parliament (308 out of a total 577), with *députés* who had in many cases been members of the traditional parties of centre left or centre right, or who previously had no party affiliation. The Les Républicains party emerged from the elections severely weakened, not only in electoral terms but also because of significant figures leaving its ranks to join forces with Macron. The Parti Socialiste, meanwhile, was in tatters, with its future survival by no means guaranteed. On the face of it, this was a substantial victory for a new type of politics, where people previously from the left, the right or with no former political allegiance pulled together for the sake of 'modernising' France, of tackling unemployment and allowing France's economy and reputation to thrive in both Europe and beyond. At first glance, then, Macron was on course to achieve the *Révolution* described in the book he published during the campaign (Macron 2016).

On closer inspection, however, we see that politics according to Macron and his new party are remarkably similar to the - often converging - programmes of centre left or centre right over the past few decades, particularly as far as economic policy is concerned, which is increasingly neo-liberal. The Macron era will very likely not, in fact, be a radical departure from what France has known for many years, but continuation in a slightly different guise. Moreover, in order to understand the significance of the 2017 elections, we also need to consider the fact that many people voted for neither Macron nor for the other candidates of the conventional centre parties, a result which reflects severe discontent with mainstream politics of the past few decades, often on the part of people who have been badly affected materially by the similar policies of successive governments. This explains in part why the extreme right Marine Le Pen came a strong second in round one of the presidential elections and why the scenario of her winning the second round was a possible one, even if unlikely. Next, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, supported by the left-of-centre La France Insoumise, also attracted nearly one fifth of all votes cast in the first round of the presidential elections. Together with very minor candidates, then, nearly 18 million (if we included Hamon's support) out of a total of 37 million votes were cast in favour of candidates who were anti-mainstream, often with very different programmes from each other but nevertheless all deeply opposed to the centre

politics of the past thirty or so years. Finally, the number of both abstentions and – perhaps most importantly – of spoiled ballots was at a record high in both presidential and parliamentary elections, and significantly higher than five years previously. Again, this suggests disillusionment with governmental politics in recent times.

### **Macron: President for the status quo**

The dynamic underlying the election of Macron and the success of La République en Marche (REM) – as the party became after the presidential elections - is not, then, part of a radical new departure in French politics, but is the logical next step along the path of increasingly managerial government that is now so familiar to people living in advanced capitalist countries. Since the U-turn of 1982-83, when President Mitterrand and his Socialist government changed direction dramatically, abandoning their neo-Keynesian reform programme in favour of austerity and wage restraint and for greater emphasis on private enterprise, the strongest trend in the way France has been governed has been one of increasing similarity between parties of the centre-left and parties of the centre-right, united especially in an increasingly economically-neoliberal direction of travel.

Since the mid-1980s, the Parti socialiste (PS) and centre-right have been sufficiently close in terms of programme to allow *cohabitation* between Presidents of one complexion and governments of the other (in 1986-88, 1993-95 and 1997-2002), an arrangement that was unthinkable between the beginning of the Fifth Republic in 1958 and the mid-1980s, when the Communist Party was strong and the Socialist current either weak or in alliance or quasi-alliance with the Communists, but since the mid-1980s perfectly acceptable to most mainstream politicians and many voters. There has also been repeated presidential *alternance* between PS and centre-right, with Socialist presidents elected in 1981, 1988 and 2012, and centre-right presidents elected in 1995, 2002 and 2007. With the election of Macron comes the – at least notional - actual merging of centre-left and centre-right in the same president, the same party and the same government, which might be seen as the most natural of developments, given that, especially in terms of economic policy, PS and centre-right have acted in similar ways. Although Sarkozy's presidency (2007-2012) took the form of a more aggressive, Bonapartist approach to economics, 'law and order' and immigration (the latter two issues were indeed seen as intimately connected), wanting the centre right to become a *droite décomplexée* which would attract FN sympathisers (Hewlett 2011), generally speaking the Socialists and the centre-right were pursuing similar agendas of neo-liberal economic change and little criticism of the European Union, which has become increasingly demanding.

Against a background of ardent support for the European Union - confirmed by a close relationship with Angela Merkel, herself head of a Grand Coalition between her own Christian Democratic party and the centre-left Social Democratic Party - Macron's economic policy is resolutely in favour of private enterprise, the free market and a more 'flexible' labour market. In his manifesto he sought further deregulation of conditions of employment and various other pro-business measures, including a more relaxed approach to the 35-hour week, tax cuts (especially for business, from 33 to 25 per cent of profits), 60 billion

euros of cuts in public expenditure over five years and drastic reduction of the size of the public sector, meaning the abolition of 120,000 civil servants' posts. Both the employers' organization Medef and the French financial press, not to mention the *Financial Times*, reacted favourably to the government's first weeks in office, but the left-leaning *Observatoire française des conjonctures économiques* (OFCE) predicted that the measures taken by the government were likely to be 'extremely favourable to the wealthiest households' and were in danger of deepening inequality between rich and poor (Charrel 2017). When the *Financial Times* interviewed Prime Minister Edouard Philippe during the July honeymoon period, the newspaper reported that according to Philippe "Macronism" is the direct legacy of Alain Juppé', and:

'[w]hen it is suggested that the government's plans for a flexible labour market, tax cuts for business and public spending curbs were all rightwing measures, Mr Philippe bursts into laughter. "Yes, what did you expect?", he says'. (Chassany and Stothard 2017)

Socially, Macron's policies are decidedly more progressive in orientation, with a relatively liberal attitude towards immigration, in particular with regards refugees from the Middle East and Africa, an approach influenced in part by Merkel, and he argues that immigration can have a positive effect on the economy. Regarding the state of emergency imposed following terrorist attacks, he believes it should end, but adds that some measures should be incorporated into French law. On the environment there are various ambitious proposals, including reduction of France's dependence on nuclear energy for generating electricity to 50 per cent by the year 2025 and the development of renewable energy. He believes prison reform is necessary, including better conditions for many prisoners. In order to achieve greater equality between men and women, Macron is in favour of several new measures, including penalties for companies and political parties that are not making efforts in this direction and increased protection for women who are victims of violence or harassment. Many have suggested that 'Macronism' is reminiscent of Blairism, in that both are economically neo-liberal, socially liberal, very pro-European Union, and one could add that both currents are or were characterised by youthful and charismatic leadership. Tony Blair's Third Way of the late 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century (Giddens 1998) has now, it seems, arrived in France.

In party political terms, early-stage Macronism is an amalgam of the right of the PS and the liberal wing of Les Républicains (LR), with some non-aligned specialists lending a hand as well. The government formed by Macron after his election was led by Prime Minister Édouard Philippe, a close ally of Alain Juppé (on the 'softer' side of LR), and included notably, from LR: Bruno Le Maire as Economics Minister (formerly agriculture minister and Secretary of State for Europe under Sarkozy); and Gérard Darmanin as Minister for Public Action and Accounts (also a former Sarkozy supporter). From the Socialists there was: Jean-Yves Le Drian as Foreign Minister (Defense Minister in the last government under Hollande); the veteran Mayor of Lyon Gérard Collomb as Minister of the Interior; and locally-elected PS member Nicole Belloubet as Minister for Justice (an academic and civil servant). 'Non-aligned' ministers included: the Minister for Labour, Murielle Pénicaud (previously director of Business France); the Minister for Health, Agnès Buzyn (a high-profile doctor); and the new environment minister, environmental activist and former television personality

Nicolas Hulot, who had refused roles in both Sarkozy and Hollande governments. There were initially four ministers from the centre-right MoDem party, including its leader François Bayrou, who supports Macron closely, but they resigned within 48 hours of their appointment, after allegations of financial impropriety in relation to the party.

Macron's personal style and character are perhaps more compatible with presidential office than Hollande's, and certainly a great deal more so than Sarkozy's. But Macron is in many ways out of the same mould as countless other career politicians and has had a highly conventional career to date, although he has reached the top far faster than most. He is a graduate of the elite *grandes écoles* Sciences Po and École nationale d'administration, he worked both as a senior civil servant (an *Inspecteur des Finances*) and as an investment banker at Rothschilds, before becoming Hollande's economic policy advisor and *protégé*, and then economics minister in Manuel Valls' government in 2014. In the summer of 2016, he resigned his ministerial post and declared that he would run for president with the support of a new movement bearing his own initials.

Macron thus in multiple ways represents continuity and even the simple arithmetic of the presidential election results suggests that many people already recognize and dislike this about him. He attracted only 24.0 per cent of the vote in the first round of the presidential elections, and was within a few percentage points of the following three candidates. There is also the context of massive numbers of spoiled ballots, whose proportion was multiplied by four from one round to the other and at 11.5 per cent in the second round was almost double the previous record for spoiled ballots, namely 6.4 per cent in 1969. As Braconnier and Dormagen (2017) argue, almost all spoiled ballots are protest votes, rather than a reflection of accidental damage of ballot papers. Abstentions, meanwhile, were very high. (See Table 3.) This would seem to indicate that, despite a significant majority in parliament for REM, Macron's period as president and his attempts to 'transform' France – as he has repeatedly promised – will be far from plain sailing.

**Table 1. The French Presidential elections of 23 April and 7 May 2017.**

**Table 2. The French Parliamentary elections of 11 June and 18 June 2017.**

**Table 3. Abstentions and spoiled ballots (*blancs et nuls*) since 1958.**

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### **Fillon and Les Républicains: defeat snatched from the jaws of victory**

The process by which Macron went from being an almost unknown politician with no elected position to being President of the Republic in the space of a few years is certainly remarkable. But it should not be forgotten that there was a large element of luck involved in this rise to the ultimate position of political power, coming mainly in the form of his principal opponent's labefaction at the hands of a satirical newspaper.

In the months running up to the publication of the first of a series of articles in *Le Canard enchaîné* on 25 January 2017 regarding the alleged embezzlement of public funds by François Fillon, opinion polls were giving the LR candidate a clear lead, suggesting that in the second round he would face Le Pen and would beat her with ease (Martin 2017, 252). Fillon was the most right-

wing choice as candidate for LR, with firmly neo-liberal positions on the economy, including tax cuts, reduction of employer contributions to social security and weakening the role of trade unions in the workplace. These were combined with ultra-conservative social positions informed by staunch Catholic values; widely-viewed as being anti-LGBT, he was committed to outlawing medically assisted procreation, banning donor insemination for single women and same sex couples, and he would have repealed legislation on the rights of same-sex couples and individuals to adopt. Similar to Sarkozy in the two previous presidential campaigns, Fillon's positions on immigration and law and order were designed in part to attract voters who were tempted to vote FN, and included the establishment of annual quotas on immigration, making it more difficult for foreigners to obtain French nationality, creating 16,000 more prison places, and bringing the age of criminal responsibility down to 16. As his campaign progressed, he appeared to move even further to the right, with greater emphasis on patriotism, promotion of the nuclear family as the only legitimate personal arrangement, declarations against 'radical Islam' and against liberal attitudes on immigration.

Until the *Canard* published its revelations, it seemed very likely that Fillon would not only become president, but that LR would win a clear majority in parliament and thus the now common cycle of PS and centre-right *alternance* would continue, at least for the time being. But the extent and the apparently well-founded nature of the allegations against Fillon put paid to that particular outcome, with the ostensibly staunch believer in moral rectitude and hard work apparently guilty of paying hundreds of thousands of euros of public funds to his wife Penelope for parliamentary assistance she had not carried out, of paying his sons for 'legal advice' before they were qualified lawyers, and of accepting gifts of very expensive suits and watches. He also reportedly persuaded a rich friend to pay Penelope for a job on a literary magazine that she did no work for and a Lebanese businessman paid him \$50,000 in return for being introduced to Vladimir Putin.

The seemingly well-founded revelations of *Penelopegate* and related scandals came at such a point in the electoral cycle as to make finding another willing and viable candidate almost impossible, even if Fillon had been prepared to stand down (which he was not), and the softer-right former presidential hopeful Alain Juppé made it clear that he was no longer prepared to put himself forward, having been previously passed by in favour of Fillon. When it was announced that Fillon had come third in the first round of the elections, he made it clear that he would vote Macron in the second round, although almost a third of his voters went on to vote Le Pen (Courtois 2017).

In the parliamentary elections, Les Républicains went from having 188 seats (as UMP) during the Hollande presidency to having 112. This was far from a complete wipe out, but the calamitous Fillon candidacy, combined with multiple high-profile defections from LR to the Macron camp after the presidential elections (including by the Prime Minister) heralded much potential trouble and divisions within the centre-right.

### **The Parti socialiste: terminal decline?**

The Parti socialiste, from whose stable Macron bolted so recently, had a disastrous presidential term under François Hollande and paid the price heavily in both presidential and parliamentary elections. Hollande began his term in office with left-leaning pledges, which were to pursue state-stimulated growth and progressive taxation: most eye-catchingly, there would be 75 per cent tax on incomes over one million euros per year; tax breaks for wealthy individuals would be capped at 10,000 euros; and bigger companies would pay a substantially higher rate of tax than smaller ones. This would all be combined with ceilings on certain high salaries in the public sector, job creation in both education and the private sector, and lowering the age of retirement. For the first time in history, in 2012 the PS had majorities in both the National Assembly and the Senate, and excellent distribution of electoral support across France and in many major cities.

But the left-inspired approach to the economy and labour relations quickly turned to dust and Hollande's presidency became the embodiment of *la pensée unique* as far as economic policy and the erosion of labour rights were concerned. There were various deeply unpopular bills, including what became the Loi El Khomri which revised the Code du Travail and eroded worker rights on lay offs, severance payments and overtime payments, and the Loi...Macron, which loosened Sunday trading rules, sold state shareholdings and introduced competition with the state rail network from coach companies. These proposed changes prompted intense strike activity, together with street demonstrations and other protests, including the innovative Nuit Debout, which became a feeder movement for La France Insoumise and helped build support for Mélenchon.

Certainly, there were various progressive measures taken during Hollande's presidency, including new legislation to allow same-sex couples to marry and jointly adopt children, known as *mariage pour tous*, which was strongly opposed both within and outside parliament, and which became law in Spring 2013. But the predominant tenor of the Hollande presidency, along with often unpopular responses to terrorist attacks, including the State of Emergency, was a concerted attempt to 'modernise' the French economy, in large part along neoliberal – and certainly highly 'pro-employer' – lines. In addition to the measures mentioned above, there were various business-oriented *pactes* (compétitivité, responsabilité, stabilité, and so on), sometimes justified by reference to the exigencies of the EU, whose economic requirements the PS itself had played an important role in shaping. With such an agenda, Hollande's governments quickly lost support from the left of the party and from the Greens, not to mention from a large part of the natural PS electorate. Amable and Palombarini (2016, 132-2; also Anderson 2017) argue that this biting the hand that votes PS has been a severe electoral handicap several times over; the party does not stick to election manifesto pledges and governs directly against the grain of the natural wishes of the popular electorate, despite the fact that the PS cannot afford to alienate these voters if it wants to be re-elected. The stinging defeats in the wake of PS governmental terms in 1986, 1993, 2002 and now 2017 reflect this feeling of betrayal on the part of many working class voters.

Once Hollande had conceded – in an all-time first for a President of the Fifth Republic - that he was unre-electable, the response by the grass roots was to select the distinctly left-leaning Benoît Hamon as the PS candidate, who beat right-wing Manuel Valls in the selection process final round by almost 20

percentage points, in a result that was reminiscent of the selection of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party in Britain. Hamon represented a clear break with the Hollande-Valls period in particular, having resigned his post as Minister for Education in 2014 in order to oppose the majority government position. Hamon's presidential programme included a universal basic income, a commitment to tax companies less if they were reinvesting profits, temporary nationalization of companies where they were failing, and tax on robots because they will increasingly take jobs away from workers, with the robot tax being used to retrain workers displaced by automation. He was highly critical not only of the recent PS governments' economic policy, but also of the Valls government's attitude towards matters of immigration and law and order, which he viewed as being little different from that of the right.

As a result of the perceived betrayals, the deep divisions and the defections in the party, the PS had the worst election results since its inception in 1971; Hamon polled only 6.4 per cent of votes in the first round of the presidential elections, after which he called for a vote for Macron against Le Pen. In the parliamentary elections, the PS received 7.4 per cent in the first round and 5.7 per cent in the second, and had only 30 *députés* in the new parliament, compared with 278 in the previous one and 186 in the one before. As a candidate himself in the parliamentary elections, Hamon did not achieve the 12.5 per cent needed in the first round to go through to the second.

Adding to an already – to say the least – uphill battle facing Hamon in the presidential campaign, leading figures in the PS had already publically disavowed him and instead supported Macron well before the first round. These included Manuel Valls, the former Prime Minister (2014-16, having been Minister for the Interior, 2012-14). Valls was keen to stand in the parliamentary elections as a REM candidate, but was refused membership of the party; it was eventually agreed that no REM candidate would be fielded against him in his constituency in Essonne, where he eventually won with a tiny (and contested) margin against La France Insoumise candidate Farida Amrani. Valls, a natural Macron ally, now supports REM in parliament and is likely to be in government again before long, alongside other PS defectors.

The PS is of course now even more deeply divided than it was before Spring 2017. The left of the party argues that if the PS had been more united behind Hamon, it might at least have been able to fair somewhat better against both Macron and Mélenchon, but as it was Hamon was both tainted by association with the Hollande presidency and also undermined by leaders of his own party. The right of the PS, meanwhile, argues that Hamon's criticism of the Hollande presidency over several years was a betrayal and that the manifesto was unrealistic. The perhaps more natural alliance between Hamon and Mélenchon, whose combined votes amounted to more than Macron's, did not happen. In the mean time, Hamon has left the PS in order to set up a grass roots organisation to assess the future of socialist politics in France and beyond. It seems that the centre-left is becoming as fissiparous as it was in the Fourth Republic.

### **Le Pen and the FN: forward march of the extreme right unhalted**



In many advanced capitalist countries, parties or movements expressing opposition to the centre-oriented, highly elite-led and business-oriented mainstream parties have enjoyed sometimes unforeseen success. These were variously parties or movements of the extreme right (including in Austria, the Netherlands, Germany and Finland), sometimes of the alternative (that is non-mainstream) left, as in Greece, Spain and (to some extent) in the British Labour Party under Corbyn. Some of these developments were difficult to classify in conventional terms, in particular the Brexit movement in Britain and the campaign which brought Donald Trump to power in the USA, which were arguably in both cases dominated and led by the right but which managed to harness the anger of many poorer working class voters as well.

The Front national under Marine Le Pen is arguably part of this revolt against the mainstream which can take so many different forms, and has become a very significant party of protest against both the PS and the LR, parties which they suggest have been pursuing very similar policies which are in the interests neither of the French nation as a whole nor poorer French people. However, notwithstanding the attempted process of *dédiabolisation* under Le Pen junior's leadership, the most prominent feature of the FN's programme is its anti-immigration stance, combined with a more general and extreme nationalism. Its presidential programme contained a great deal on the questions of law and order, terrorism and immigration, preoccupations which were closely associated with one another, and argued for the 'end of uncontrolled immigration', the abolition of the no-passport control Schengen Area and for restricting immigration into France to 10,000 per year. 'Anti-terrorist' measures included the expulsion of any immigrant convicted of terrorist-related offenses. 'Security' policies, designed to 'bring order back to France', included the creation of 40,000 additional prison places, life imprisonment meaning literally imprisonment until death, a referendum on bringing back the death penalty, 15,000 extra police officers, and 50,000 additional soldiers.

Another aspect of this ultra-nationalist programme is what is described as 'la priorité nationale' as far as housing, social security payments and employment are concerned, allowing only French nationals access to state-owned housing and benefits, and offering a competitive advantage to French companies, and higher taxes for companies employing non-French nationals. The FN also supports secularism against the supposed 'Islamicisation' of French society, the re-introduction of school uniform, a more traditional school curriculum, and the abolition of the right of same-sex couples to marry.

The FN's economic policies are a bizarre – and no doubt entirely unworkable – mix of neo-liberal and state interventionist, pro-worker, measures, designed to appeal variously to the world of business and a working class electorate deeply disillusioned with the centre parties. Thus, measures to cut 'red tape', reduce employer contributions in small and medium-sized businesses and a commitment not to increase the minimum wage, sit alongside promises to overturn the Loi El Komri, give increases to the lowest paid, maintain the 35-hour week and bring the retirement age back down to 60.

Highly critical of the European Union, the FN argues that it is both a vehicle for bringing unwanted foreigners into France and that it allows competition from other EU states to have a deleterious effect on some companies

in France. Le Pen promised a referendum on both withdrawal from the EU and from the euro, without taking a consistent stance on either issue herself.

In addition to being a party that infuses much of its programme with hostility towards immigration and in favour of law and order and 'traditional values', the FN's ambition has been to become the number one party of protest against the mainstream. This has indeed come true, and Marine Le Pen's going through to the second round of the presidential elections with only one million fewer votes than Macron in the first round is ultimate proof of this. Le Pen was particularly aggressive towards Macron in the debate between the two rounds and no doubt lost support as a result, but she nevertheless polled 34 per cent in the second round, which was almost exactly double the proportion of votes received by her father Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2002.

In the parliamentary elections, the FN did less well – no doubt in part because of the 'presidentialist logic' of the national election cycle in France, where the parliamentary elections tend to confirm the presidential elections, but also because part of the success of the FN has been the figure of Le Pen herself, as with her father before her, which works to the FN's advantage in presidential elections and far less in parliamentary elections. The nature of the electoral system meant that with 8.8 per cent of the vote in the second round the FN ended up with only 8 *députés* (less than two per cent of the total), which may well serve to compound the view amongst many voters as well as non-voters that the electoral system does not allow fair representation in parliament.

### **Mélenchon and La France Insoumise: the return of the alternative left?**

For the first time since the late 1970s, when the French Communist Party was still a force to be reckoned with, the candidate of a party to the left of the PS received roughly one in five votes in the presidential elections. This was the second time the former PS Minister for Vocational Education (2000-2002) Jean-Luc Mélenchon ran for president, this time supported by his party La France Insoumise. With only the Trotskyists Philippe Poutou and Nathalie Arthaud to his left, he almost doubled his result from 2012, when he polled 11.1 per cent. Mélenchon's programme set out plans to curtail the power of banks and other financial institutions, to stop virtually all redundancies, in part by imposing financial penalties on companies seeking to make employees redundant, and greatly increase employees' control over their work environment and allowing them to form cooperatives in cases of firm closures. 3.5 million new jobs were promised, partly as a result of reductions in the length of the working week from 35 to 32 hours, and the state would invest in national projects to the tune of 100 billion euros over five years. The minimum wage would be raised to 1326 euros per month. Protectionist measures in relation to France's economy would both save threatened jobs and help reduce unacceptable practices in poorer countries, including child labour. Equality between women and men would be promoted in part by allowing strictly the same parental leave rights between men and women. Perhaps the most radical proposal was for a new constitution and a new (Sixth) Republic, which would establish – via referendum – a constituent assembly made up equally of women and men, elected via proportional representation and disbarring anyone who had been a *député* under the Fifth Republic. Once the Sixth Republic had been established, President Mélenchon

would resign, finally allowing what was described as a far more democratic system to take over.

In terms of foreign policy, France would leave NATO, withdraw from dubious alliances with foreign leaders and from wars which derailed the cause of international peace. The United Nations would be supported more enthusiastically. On Europe, negotiations would take place to make the EU more democratic, less neo-liberal and generally more in tune with the interests of ordinary citizens; after negotiations had taken place, there would be a referendum on whether or not to leave the EU. As far as immigration was concerned, emphasis would be placed both on treating immigrants and their children with dignity in France and on helping prevent circumstances arising in other countries which led to forced migration.

In the first round of the presidential elections Mélenchon received 19.6 per cent of the vote, meaning the discrepancy between the results of Le Pen, Fillon and Mélenchon was less than two percentage points, and each candidate thus received roughly one fifth of the vote. In the parliamentary elections, La France Insoumise received respectively 11.0 and 4.9 per cent of the vote in the first and second rounds and only 17 deputies were elected. This still means that the party can form a 'parliamentary group' and is arguably the principal opposition party on the left, at least on a par with the PS, assuming it works in parliament with the PCF's ten *députés* and taking Mélenchon's showing in the presidential elections into account. This is a significant development and potentially a crucial part of a restructuring of French party politics.

Various analysts have suggested that the positions of the FN and La France Insoumise in the elections were similar and that the FN is no longer classically on the extreme right. Certainly, both parties emphasised defending the interests of the ordinary working or unemployed person and this is often placed in contrast with the actions and interests of more conventional politicians. But we have seen how the FN's programme and politics more generally is infused with extreme nationalism and often scapegoating and a glance at declared motivations for voting one way or the other in the first round of the presidential elections, according to the polling organization IPSOS, show that FN voters are clear about this. When asked for the three most important reasons for voting FN, 69 per cent chose immigration, 46 per cent terrorism and 42 per cent law and order (*insécurité*); when La France Insoumise voters were asked the same question, 42 per cent chose social inequality and other primary preoccupations varied greatly, but very few saw the FN voters' first choices as priorities (IPSOS 2017).

## Conclusions

The phenomenal double victory of Macron and REM in France may seem to fly in the face of major political developments in other advanced capitalist countries. Elsewhere, what were seen as marginal currents, parties or movements claiming to act on behalf of the ordinary person against the ravages of free trade and neo-liberalism, the irresponsible international banking system and the EU, have gathered much support over the past few years. From Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, to the Corbyn phenomenon in Britain and even elements of the Brexit referendum vote and Trump's victory in the USA, forces flying in the

face of established politics and accepted wisdom in economic policy have been disrupting the conventions of government as established over the past thirty years. Macron, on the other hand, has achieved a victory that is explicitly and proudly centrist, giving him a mandate (or so he perceives it) to draw on specialists of the economics of the status quo, whether centre-left, centre-right or non-aligned, in order at last to make France the successful advanced capitalist society that will offer success at the top and trickle-down benefits all the way down to the bottom.

This familiar-sounding rhetoric and programme, I have argued, is in fact far from the substantial new departure it has been portrayed as being in much of the media, and has far more in common with the attempts at change by centre-right and centre-left governments over the past few decades than its image would suggest. Certainly, the party-packaging is new, and a young, brilliant leader who is (apparently) morally beyond reproach is President. Moreover, the path to the Elysée Palace and the huge Assemblée nationale majority is strewn with the casualties of both the Hollande presidency and the election campaigns. The established centre parties of the Fifth Republic have taken a battering of historic proportions.

But, given the picture in other advanced capitalist countries, where tectonic shifts appear to be taking place in the way in which politics works – or rather where conventional politics no longer seems to work – it is likely that there is far more to this story. First, it is likely that, to borrow an expression from Wolfgang Streeck (2014), France is buying time. The attempts at change by various governments have been unsuccessful and neither business people, nor the unions, nor the unemployed, nor millions of ordinary voters are satisfied with the status quo, which Macron's plans show little prospect of altering substantially. Macron and colleagues are, it would seem, delaying the moment when more drastic or substantial action will be sought by far more voters. At present, this is expressed by many in electoral terms by voting for the FN, and to some extent by voting for La France Insoumise and other, smaller alternative left parties. But one of the most overlooked aspects of the elections in 2017 has been the (in every sense) extraordinary volume of abstentions and in particular of spoiled ballots, expressions of protest in particular against being presented with the choice between Macron and Le Pen in the second round of the presidential elections. The sentiment behind these spoiled ballots seemed to be summed up by graffiti at the Place de la République in Paris written between the two rounds: 'Ni patrie ni patron. Ni Le Pen ni Macron.'

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