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One step left, two steps right

Does Macron's victory sound the death knell for French socialism?

Following a first round which was nothing short of an earthquake and redrew the country's electoral map overnight, Emmanuel Macron has now taken his place in the Elysée Palace as President of France. While the *Front National*'s final result in the second round may have been a disaster for the party, it would be unwise to forget the fact that the party emerged as the strongest French party in the European elections of 2014 and won the first round of voting in France's 2015 regional elections, too. As such, the real news is not the strength of Marine Le Pen, who has built up a stable electoral base in recent years, but rather the emergence of a new candidate – one without a party, issued from the ranks of the Hollande government – and the collapse of this latter's *Parti Socialiste (PS)*; also of note has been the ebbing away of the centre-right *Les Républicains (LR)*, mired in the corruption scandals surrounding their candidate, François Fillon (whom, it is all too easy to forget, polls had placed in second place behind Alain Juppé in the party's primaries). Another notable development is the strong support garnered by Jean-Luc Mélenchon with his movement *La France insoumise* ("France undefeated") sporting a set of opinions on Europe dangerously similar to those of Le Pen and sharing with her the intention of taking France out of the European Union.

The Socialist Francois Hollande won the presidency in 2012 on the back of a manifesto pledging increased public investment aimed at generating economic growth. Yet Hollande soon switched to a reform agenda with the aim of controlling the country's deficit. Some saw this as a betrayal of his own stated aims, but if anything, reality simply caught up with him. Since his government had to act within a European framework dominated by the political right, he tried to increase his room for manoeuver by advancing the European agenda (banking union, the EU defence initiative): in short, he had promised more than he could ever possibly deliver.

The Portuguese socialists got into power at the end of 2015 with a similar manifesto to Hollande's. But there is a crucial difference. The European Commission has now decided to revise the way it applies the Stability

and Growth Pact, deferring the target dates for reducing public deficits. It therefore didn't veto the new Portuguese government's budget in its first year, neither did it freeze payments from Structural Funds after the Portuguese missed their deficit reduction target in 2016. The increased clout of socialist parties in the European Parliament and the European Council has seen a reorientation of policy.

Some might see this as a limitation on national sovereignty of the kind lamented by the new wave of populist-nationalist parties, who – regardless of whether they are on the far right or far left of the political spectrum – view "the reign of Brussels bureaucrats" as a form of technocratic dictatorship. Yet in reality, it is no more than the logical path of development for a democratic institution which shares out competencies across various administrations.

Hollande, on the other hand, had to implement his plans in a European environment, much as Spain's former prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero was forced to after 2010. But the French socialists would not accept this reality. By mid-2014, several ministers had left the cabinet and, joining forces with a group of the party's MPs, went into opposition against their own government. Hollande should probably be assigned a portion of the blame for poor party management, but the fact remains that an informal rift had opened up in the party which remains to this day. A key mistake was to fight the 2012 election on manifesto pledges which, in the European democratic environment of 2012, could never have been implemented.

This internal split was a – perhaps the – major factor in eroding Hollande's authority as president to the point where he did not run for a second term; it turned into a gaping chasm in the recent primaries, in which one of the *frondeurs* (as the rebels are known) who had resigned from ministerial office in 2014 was elected as the party's candidate for the presidency: Benoît Hamon. Meanwhile one of Hollande's former ministers for the economy who had previously been his presidential advisor decided to run on a new platform, promising to expand and accelerate the reforms started by none other than Hollande himself.

We know the results: in the first round of voting, one part of the left grouped around Mélenchon, who pledged to quit the European Union if it refused to tow his line, while the more moderate, progressive elements of the party found themselves supporting Macron's candidacy. In the first round, Macron benefited greatly from anti-Le-Pen tactical voting and from the scandals dogging François Fillon; in the second round, this and the rest of what the French call *le vote républicain* – an anti-extremist majority – coalesced around Macron.

There is no denying that, for the *Parti Socialiste*, the result was tragic. Yet the key lesson is that a correct analysis of European and national competencies must form the basis for making realistic electoral promises. The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament is, at present, little more than a confederation of centre-left parties. In many countries, our member parties run on manifestos in which Europe is presented a matter for foreign affairs; this does not do justice to the fact that European politics also stakes out the overall framework in which we act in the national sphere. This is in turn hampering efforts to engage citizens in politics at every level, and leading to frustration with the European Union.

So the French case is useful in helping us to understand the nature of the game in Europe and how socialist parties ought best face up to debate on a European level. Just as in the post-war years, we need to reconstitute the political approach to the welfare state. Once, this was the issue on which social democrats to the left and Christian democrats to the right competed. At the moment, the French *Parti Socialiste* is facing a serious challenge, with parliamentary elections in June which could well signal its demise. We will see how the promise of liberty, equality, and fraternity, the rallying cry around which French socialism has gathered since its dawn, holds up – and who upholds it.

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