

A grin without a cat

The French Right returns to office

Jim Wolfreys

One of the many peculiarities of May 1968 was the sudden return to normality apparently indicated by the electoral victory for the Right which followed in June. The recent spate of elections in France seems at first glance to have followed a similar pattern. The presidential poll of 21 April, described as a political 11 September, in which the Front National (FN) candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen came second amid a dismal showing for all the mainstream candidates, set off an extraordinary surge of anti-Le Pen protests and demonstrations during a febrile two weeks which highlighted the decline of the institutions of the Fifth Republic. In June, however, the decisive parliamentary majority won by Chirac's right-wing Union for the Presidential Majority (UMP) coalition, following his own election as president, was taken by some as proof of an end to the upheaval, heralding a period of institutional stability.

In fact, just as victory in June 1968 turned out to be a prelude to defeat for De Gaulle, so Chirac's success signals neither a significant shift to the Right nor an end to the crisis of mainstream politics in France. This is suggested by a variety of indicators. Leaving aside the second round of the presidential contest, the exceptional circumstances of which guaranteed a high turnout, each election set new records for abstention, rising to almost four in ten of all voters in the final round of the parliamentary election. Abstention rates on the first round meant that the UMP's mandate was based on the support of less than a quarter of registered voters. In the presidential election France's leading mainstream parties (the Socialists, Communists, Gaullists and the right-wing UDF coalition), once able to command three-quarters of the vote on a regular basis, saw their share of the poll fall to below 50 per cent. The combined vote for the two principal candidates, Chirac and Jospin, was lower than the 11 million abstentions, which included 40 per cent of young voters. Jospin's highest level of support came from voters in their sixties, Chirac's from those over seventy. During the 1960s and 1970s both the president and the parliamentary majority were generally elected on over 40 per cent of the first-round vote. Under Mitterrand this fell to around 30 per cent for the president and 40 per cent for the parliamentary majority. Today the president and his parliamentary majority hold power with around 20 per cent and 30 per cent of their respective first-round vote, as clear an illustration as any of the political and institutional debilitation confronting mainstream parties. 'New political perspectives for the French and new instruments to embody them remain to be invented', argued the constitutionalist Yves Mény in *Le Monde* following the April election, adding that this is 'a vast programme, of which not a single element can for the moment be seen on the horizon'.

The most obvious symptom of the fragmentation of political life was the record number of candidates who stood in each election. Despite the failure of successive governments to deal with rising inequalities, and despite the deep-seated corruption which has come to define France's political establishment, mainstream actors and commentators still managed to express outrage at the temerity of the smaller candidates. Leading political scientists, like Olivier Duhamel of the elite Institut d'Etudes Politiques, proposed changes to electoral law to prevent such candidates standing. The Socialists blamed their defeat not on Jospin's inability to hold on to his 1995 electorate (he retained only half his manual-worker vote) but on the 10 per cent of the first-round poll won by the revolutionary Left. The real problem, of course, was not the far Left itself, but the fact that nearly 3 million people were prepared to vote for its candidates. What did for Jospin, moreover, was not so much that candidates resolutely opposed to the neo-liberal compromises of his coalition government were prepared to stand against him, but that none of the four candidates from formations which had actively participated alongside Jospin in five years of privatization and redundancies was prepared to desist in favour of his candidacy. Had any one of them stood down, Jospin would have defeated Le Pen.

Social liberalism and the 'plural Left'

Each component of the plural Left has been damaged in different ways by the experience of office. The plight of the French Communist Party (PCF) is particularly severe. An electoral deal with the Socialists meant that the party narrowly managed to retain a parliamentary group in June, but its share of the vote fell below 5 per cent. This result, coming on the back of Robert Hue's abject performance in the presidential election, when spoilt ballots proved a more popular choice than voting Communist, has provoked further debate about the party's *'mutation'* into a compliant social-democratic partner for the Socialists. The fate of the plural Left is a product of an ongoing crisis of social democracy. 'When politics are inspired by liberalism, what part do we want our ideas, our socialist instruments to play?' Jospin asked his party in the late 1980s. The same question is now being asked of his own administration. Having privatized more public companies than any of its right-wing predecessors, the Jospin government persistently refused to honour its electoral promise to step in when companies threatened mass redundancies. Jospin's decision not to intervene to stop the factory closure at Renault-Vilvorde immediately after his election in 1997 set the tone for the rest of his term of office. When Michelin announced a three-year plan for 7,500 job losses in September 1999, despite a 17.3 per cent rise in the company's profits, Jospin was blunt: 'I do not think we can administer the economy.' Workers at Moulinex and at the LU-Danone factory in Calais were also to count the cost of the plural Left's social liberalism.

The government's flagship 35-hour week reform proved a bitter disappointment to those who hoped it would improve people's lives. Instead, in a context of job insecurity, long-term unemployment and aggressive management attitudes to sackings and working conditions, the reform simply increased this sense of insecurity, especially among manual workers. Many of them were forced to accept not just irregular working patterns, as employers seized the chance to impose 'flexibility', but a wage freeze and the scrapping of overtime payments. So by the end of the 1990s, despite the much trumpeted fall in unemployment under Jospin, almost a third of all workers felt that their jobs were in danger. Jospin's problem was not simply that his claim to want a 'market economy but not a market society' proved illusory. He had to deal with the consequences. The government's insistence, therefore, on the problem of 'urban violence', as Loïc Wacquant has underlined, had less to do with any new developments concerning juvenile delinquency than with a shift in the role of the state, away from a Keynesian stress on reducing inequalities and regulating the market towards a Darwinian celebra-

tion of individual responsibility and competition, implying collective irresponsibility and an emphasis on law and order.

The success of the Right, then, was due more to the Left's failure to offer meaningful reform than to any real surge of support for Chirac or his new prime minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. Indeed, although Jospin was knocked out of the presidential race on the first round, the mainstream Left's vote as a whole fell by only 1.5 million, compared to 4 million for the traditional Right. Polls have subsequently shown that Chirac's resounding triumph in the standoff against Le Pen was achieved with more left- than right-wing support. So the new government and the president both find themselves in power with a remarkably narrow electoral base. This explains why the UMP chose the unassuming figure of Raffarin to front its election campaign. Pulling the strings, however, is Alain Juppé, architect of the disastrous social security reforms of autumn 1995, which brought millions of workers onto the streets and wrecked the Right's legislative programme the last time it was in office. The early signs, notably in Raffarin's refusal to offer a significant rise in the minimum wage, are that noises made during the campaign about respecting the wishes of the 'France from below' will eventually give way to the kind of technocratic austerity characteristic of Juppé.

Beyond the mainstream

The fragility of all the principal currents to have dominated postwar politics in France – social democracy, communism, Gaullism and neo-liberalism – leaves the political establishment vulnerable to further challenges from beyond the mainstream, despite the apparent fading of their threat between April and June. The fall in support for 'outsider' candidates in June was due in part to the simple reason that the parliamentary elections, where parties stand over five hundred rather than one candidate, are less favourable to smaller formations. In this context, the June showing for the extreme Right compared favourably with its performance in previous parliamentary elections, down on its 1997 score but roughly on a par with its 1993 vote. Since its electoral breakthrough in the 1980s the Front has used the issue of immigration to gain a foothold in national politics. It has then chosen to stress other themes – Holocaust revisionism, racial inequality, elitist authoritarianism – in its attempt to fashion a hard core of fascist support. In 2002 it was the law-and-order issue, pushed to the top of the political agenda by the Socialists, which filled the role hitherto played by immigration. The Front's dual strategy of courting legitimacy via elections while retaining its anti-establishment status and its threat to democratic institutions will only be helped by the new government's acceptance of the Front's agenda on asylum and law-and-order.

One of the paradoxes of the presidential election, however, was that Le Pen's success came at a time when the organization he leads is weaker than at any point over the past decade, following the split which saw the party chairman Bruno Mégret form a rival party in 1999. This was underlined by the Front's comparatively low profile during the presidential campaign, its lack of street sales, its failure to mobilize more than one-fifth of the expected 100,000 supporters for its May Day parade and the fact that it managed to hold only one, poorly attended, election rally between the two rounds of the election. The Front has therefore yet to transform electoral support into an anchored mass movement of the far Right. In this sense, the 3 million votes won by the revolutionary Left in April, up 1.5 million since 1995, compared to a rise of under 1 million for the extreme Right, stand out as the reflection of an active social force, the electoral expression of a genuine, tangible movement of workers and anti-capitalist youth, while the fascist threat posed by Le Pen, although alarming, has yet to develop beyond the electoral arena.

Le Pen's success, the credibility and prestige which it has brought, will strengthen the organization in the short term. In the week following the presidential results the party claimed to be recruiting between 600 and 1,000 people a day. One striking consequence of Le Pen's performance was the willingness of FN voters to express publicly their reasons for voting FN. The fact that he maintained the support of over 5.5 million people in the second-round standoff against Chirac, in spite of the biggest wave of anti-racist mobilizations ever seen in France, is an indication of how the polarization of politics in France is intensifying. There comes a point, then, when pinning the label fascist on Le Pen and denouncing his racism is not enough. Millions have shown that they are willing to stomach all this in the hope that Le Pen will bring a strong-arm solution to their problems. Many of these people will only be won away from Le Pen if they feel another credible alternative is on offer.

The situation in France today is vastly different to that which accompanied the Front's initial rise to prominence. Although two decades of neo-liberal attacks have left their mark on sections of French society, the demoralization and bitterness of the 1980s have given way to renewed combativity and confidence. The powerful wave of anti-fascist mobilizations which took place on a daily basis nationwide from the moment the results were announced represented the biggest wave of protests to hit France since 1995. The demonstrations mixed anger, humour, solemnity and irreverence and were characterized above all by their verve and spontaneity. This was not an inward-looking, defensive reaction against fascism but a vigorous, confident movement which is spontaneously seeking political alternatives. It is this movement which is posing the question of unity on the revolutionary Left and the possibility of building a new anti-capitalist organization.

The performance of the revolutionary Left's candidates in the presidential election, Arlette Laguiller for Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and Olivier Besancenot for the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), confirms that the new mood opened up by the public-sector strikes of late 1995, and the impetus this gave to anti-racism and anti-capitalism, have not dissipated. The years following these strikes have seen a resurgence of labour militancy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the development of political activism beyond the confines of mainstream parties. Towards the end of the decade both began to fuse with a burgeoning anti-capitalist movement associated with figures like José Bové and groups like Attac. In the June election, although LO and the LCR improved slightly on their 1997 showing, their combined vote of around 3 per cent was down on their April score. This was due partly to the different nature of the poll and to



the pressure on the electorate to vote tactically for the bigger parties to avoid a repeat of Le Pen's earlier success. But there were other reasons why the initiative slipped away from the far Left between April and June. Lutte Ouvrière's rejection of the LCR's call for a joint election campaign in the wake of the presidential result, as a prelude to the construction of a united anti-capitalist left, upset the dynamic which had built up by April. It also meant that in many constituencies those looking for an alternative to the plural Left were faced with a choice between candidates from LO and the LCR. LO's attitude has provoked an internal crisis for the organization and looks set to damage its capacity to exert a meaningful influence over the forthcoming process of recomposition on the Left.

Despite appearances, the polarization of French political life has not diminished following the Right's victory in June. With a right-wing government set to attempt further privatizations and make unpopular decisions over pensions, health and social security, conflict with the so-called social movement is likely to occur sooner rather than later. Ongoing struggles between workers and employers, and between the government and a variety of associations – organizing, notably, immigrants, the homeless and the unemployed – have been a consistent feature of recent French politics. Neither side has yet been able to win a decisive victory. Jospin sought balance. But if this was to mean anything, as his critics pointed out, the interests of the world of work needed to be taken into account. His failure to do so led to his rejection at the polls. The Right, with Juppé as its *éminence grise* and Le Pen waiting in the wings, will attempt to wrest the initiative away from the world of work. The ability of the anti-capitalist Left to give political expression to the vibrant grassroots movement which has developed since 1995, and which resurfaced spectacularly between the two rounds of the presidential election, could have a decisive impact in tipping the balance the other way.

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