

A fundamental agreement

The French presidential elections

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After twelve years of a relatively weak right-wing presidency under Jacques Chirac which saw several waves of mass struggle (beginning with the public-sector strikes of December 1995), a five-year period of cohabitation with Socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin from 1997 to 2002 and, more recently, huge gains for the Socialist Party in local and regional elections, Nicolas Sarkozy's victory marks a new and more serious attempt to implement neoliberal policies. For some, such is the scale of the defeat for the Left that a new epoch has begun. For left-wing anthropologist and political activist Alain Bertho, for example, the election marked 'something radically new and probably irreversible, an "event" and not an "accident" ... a new conception of the State'.

It would be easy to conclude from such writings that the end for the Left is nigh – though that is certainly not Bertho's intention. Predictions of doom are indeed common in progressive circles. The danger is that such predictions tend to be self-fulfilling. There is a real risk that demoralization of left-wing activists, internal manoeuvres in the Socialist Party and recriminations between supporters of different radical candidates will create a vicious circle, corroborating the most pessimistic analyses. Sarkozy's success was impressive, as were his first pronouncements and decisions as president: the man himself has proved to be a consummate political 'artist'. There is no doubt that June's parliamentary election will magnify his victory. However, his 53 per cent share of the second-round vote hardly represents a Napoleonic plebiscite. Before French progressives head for exile, we need to examine what happened.

Sarkozy

First, 'the most stupid Right in the world' (as French conservatives themselves often used to say) has finally got its act together, under the leadership of a talented parvenu 52-year-old lawyer. No other potential candidate could claim to have the drive, ability or cross-class support to beat the Socialist Party candidate and go on to implement the ambitious programme of counter-reforms that big business in France has long envied its British counterparts. The party which Sarkozy fought to take over and led into the election, the UMP, has finally become what the French Establishment has long dreamed of – a united party of the Right, going from the populist and nationalist 'hard Right' to the social-liberal Centre.

Despite occasional 'wobbles', as when Sarkozy's so-called 'love affair' with the USA led him to flatter President George W. Bush (hardly the most popular man even in French business circles), the UMP's election campaign was ruthless and well organized.

Most importantly, Sarkozy's brand of populism mixed with deep conservatism enabled him to weaken the far Right and unify disparate groups of voters. The vast majority of those who deserted the Front National's ageing Jean-Marie Le Pen switched to Sarkozy. Remarks such as 'Those who criticize France are not obliged to live here', and his famous boast that he would 'rid you of this scum' (referring ostensibly to young delinquents, but generally interpreted as an attack on young people of black African, West Indian and North African origin), undoubtedly tapped into a deep strain of racism and authoritarianism. In particular, Sarkozy benefited from a solid bedrock of support from older voters, very probably in reaction to the suburban riots of November 2005 and, crucially, a recent incident at the Paris Gare du Nord when hundreds of young people clashed with riot police.

The natural candidate of France's business leaders, with close ties to large capitalist groups such as Lagardère and Dassault, Sarkozy also appealed to many conservative-minded and authoritarian manual workers, including (one suspects) many ex-Communist voters. Identified as the main advocate of deporting undocumented immigrants, he has taken care to make gestures towards established immigrant groups. While defending France's secular republican tradition, he has spoken of the positive role of religion in holding society together and floated the idea of 'positive discrimination'.

Sarkozy's victory was built on a carefully constructed mosaic of social groups with often conflicting interests. In Socialist or Communist strongholds, his speeches were littered with references to working-class heroes such as the early-twentieth-century Socialist leader and martyr Jean Jaurès, and the leader of the 1930s' Popular Front Léon Blum. His emphasis on 'the value of work', his claim to represent the hard-working ('those who get up early' as opposed to those who do not want to work) enabled him to appeal to middle-class voters, the self-employed and private-sector employees on the grounds that he would be hard on 'spongers', public-sector strikers, social security claimants, so-called 'feather-bedded' civil servants and so on.

A key theme of Sarkozy's campaign was an attack on France's much-maligned 35-hour week, not only as a hindrance to business (especially small firms) but also as a restriction on the 'right' of workers to boost their income through overtime – summarized in the slogan 'Work longer to earn more.' When, in the later stages of the campaign, a massive golden handshake to the former chairman of EADS, the Franco-German aeronautical consortium – a company which recently announced several thousand redundancies – caused widespread revulsion and led to walkouts by EADS workers, Sarkozy skilfully responded by announcing that he would introduce a law banning such practices (curiously linking them to the loosening of moral values supposedly brought about by the revolutionaries of May 1968).

The emphasis on rewarding individual effort and allowing 'honest' workers to keep the fruits of their labour by cutting income tax, as well as Sarkozy's promotion of a property-owning democracy, are classic right-wing recipes reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher. Another similarity is the assault on 'progressive' ideas in education and on moral permissiveness, culminating, in a classic case of right-wing *revanchisme*, in the promise to 'liquidate the heritage of May 1968'. His ideal, Sarkozy said, was 'the school of Jules Ferry' – the founder of the French public education system in the 1880s and a leading advocate of colonization. Many teachers, it seems, were open to such arguments, despite their traditional left-wing leanings – helped no doubt by Ségolène Royal's inept remarks about making them work longer hours.

On visits to parts of the South, where support for the Front National is strong and there are many repatriated French settlers from Algeria, Sarkozy waxed lyrical about France's imperial past, including positive references to Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign and the 'enlightened' colonialism of Marshal Lyautey in Morocco. Skilfully playing on the notion of France's 'civilizing mission' as the incarnation of the republican triptych

of Liberty, Equality (of opportunity) and Fraternity, he combined emotional appeals to French patriotism with tear-jerking references to France's role in bringing peace and harmony to the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Africa.

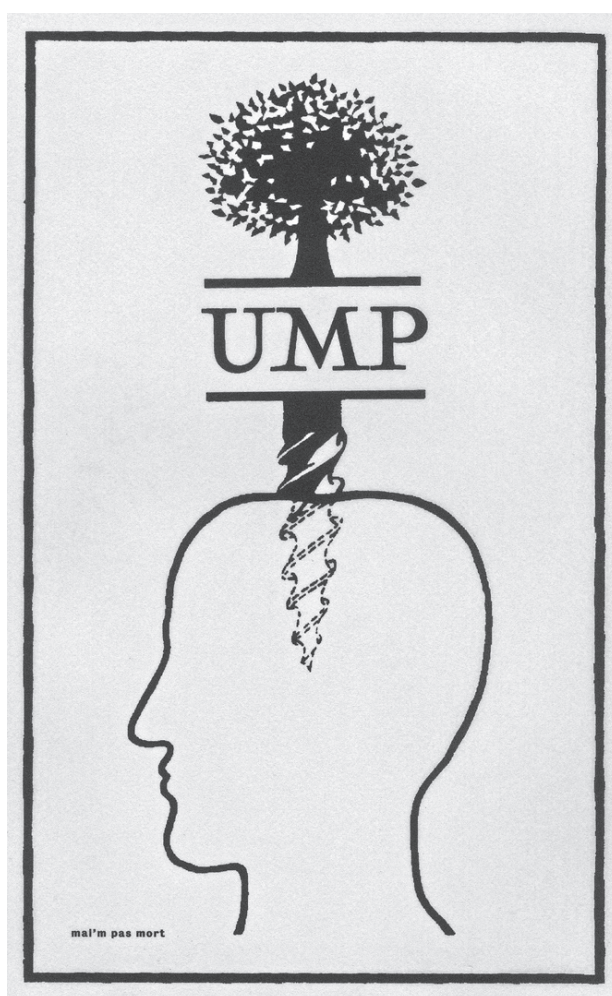
A recurrent theme of Sarkozy's speeches was his opposition to so-called 'political correctness', especially his attack on 'national repentance' – a reference to recent controversies on the responsibility of the French state during the Nazi occupation, the slave trade and the colonial period. Sarkozy's election also marks a break with France's so-called 'Arab policy' in the Middle East. A strong defender of the Israelis, he obtained nearly 90 per cent support from France's large Jewish community, according to one poll.

Following the election, the Sarkozy show has continued. Seven of the fifteen ministerial posts were given to women, including one of North African origin as Justice Minister. Several left-wing personalities were also offered jobs, including Bernard Kouchner, a maverick ex-Maoist, who became foreign minister. Even before the election, various ex-left-wing figures had declared their support for Sarkozy, including André Glucksmann and several representatives of the 'national-republican' wing of French socialism, such as the historian Max Gallo. These new recruits to 'Sarkozyism' have no political base, and have long abandoned any socialist principles they once had (Kouchner was one of the few French politicians to support the American war in Iraq; Glucksmann has been a vociferous opponent of multiculturalism and theorist of 'national identity'). They were enough, however, to create some confusion in the socialist camp and give the government an appearance of what the French call *ouverture* (making concessions to different political forces). Has there been, then, a historic shift to the Right in French society?

The facts do not completely bear out this view. The Left's combined vote in the first round was indeed historically low, the Communist Party is probably clinically dead as a national political force, and the hopelessly divided radical Left managed a little over 10 per cent – an impressive score by international standards but extremely disappointing after the excellent results obtained in 2002 and the successful united-front 'No' campaign in the 2005 European referendum.

However, some care should be taken when interpreting these statistics. The pressure to vote tactically (or 'usefully' as the French say) was immense, leading for example to many radical leftists voting Socialist, and Socialists voting for the centrist François Bayrou. Royal's 9 million-plus votes in the first round already represented twice the total obtained by then Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in 2002. Bayrou's share of the vote tripled from 2002, reaching a surprising 18 per cent. In the second round, many of these voters returned to the Socialist camp, allowing Royal to obtain 47 per cent on a huge turnout.

Unlike Chirac in 1995, Sarkozy was unable to make a breakthrough among the youngest voters. In multiracial working-class areas like the Seine-Saint-Denis, his constituency was often significantly narrower than Chirac's, the main trend being a shift from the Communists to the Socialists and to a lesser extent Bayrou. In the first



round, according to one poll, only 1 per cent of Muslims voted for the UMP candidate, compared with 37 per cent of Catholics. Only 17 per cent of unskilled manual workers voted for Sarkozy in the first round (46 per cent in the second round) and 25 per cent of white-collar workers (49 per cent in the second round), as against 37 per cent of businessmen (82 per cent in the second round). Voting patterns also correlated strongly with income, with higher-income groups voting massively for the Right.

Royal

So, does Sarkozy's victory represent the end of left-wing politics as we know it, a definitive turning-of-the-page in which class interests no longer fashion political allegiances and individualism rules? There was nothing inevitable about Sarkozy's electoral success, and nothing proves that he will have a free ride in the future. Sarkozy himself will no doubt have reflected on, and learned from, the fate of Thatcher, Bush and Berlusconi. Before his election, the new president was far from being a universally popular figure – much less so than the affable, *bon vivant* Chirac. Widely and reasonably seen as power-hungry, unscrupulous and disloyal, his image with 'moderate' voters is still far from positive. He first came to prominence as mayor of the upper-class ghetto of Neuilly in the suburbs of Paris, where he obtained 83 per cent of the vote in the second round.

Most importantly, Sarkozy's policies and postures have frequently produced hostility and accusations of exacerbating tensions. His attitude towards young offenders, his knee-jerk defence of the police and his apparent belief in genetic explanations of various forms of deviance, while undoubtedly popular with many, met with real opposition from social workers, judges and researchers. When 'Sarkozy's police' overreached themselves, protests were not limited to young *casseurs* or radical community workers. In many cases, the opposition of fellow pupils, teachers and others forced the administration onto the defensive and victories were won.

On other issues, too, Sarkozy walked a very thin line. His view that immigrants should accept the values of the host country is undoubtedly shared by the majority, but his proposal to create a Ministry of Immigration and National Identity raised considerable hackles. His publicly proclaimed belief in the positive role of religion in inculcating moral values, combined with his admiration for all things American, as well as his apparent espousal of the idea of 'positive discrimination', exposed him to suspicion of *communautarisme* (a serious charge in France).

Finally, Sarkozy not only defended previous policies on pensions, social security reform, privatization, university reform and taxation – all designed to make workers and students pay a greater share of the costs, free capital for profitable investment and give French industry a more competitive edge – but he stated clearly that he intended to go further. On all of these questions, previous governments have faced massive opposition and in some cases have been forced to make major U-turns. In this election, however, Sarkozy faced no frontal opposition from the so-called 'main' candidates, who were broadly agreed on the necessity for such measures, differing only on the extent and the pace of the 'reforms' and the methods to implement them. Sarkozy, Royal and Bayrou had all pronounced in favour of the neoliberal European constitutional treaty during the 2005 referendum campaign.

Royal's campaign undoubtedly inspired more enthusiasm than Jospin's in 2002. Both Sarkozy's and Royal's rallies were successful, with 60,000 attending the last big Socialist meeting in a Paris sports stadium, but so were Bayrou's, Besancenot's and even those of last-minute candidate Jose Bové. This was a highly politicized election which culminated in a massive turnout of over 80 per cent in both rounds. But Royal's public speaking and debating skills, though by no means ridiculous, failed to match Sarkozy's professionalism and sheer nerve.

The real weakness of Royal's campaign, however, was political. Her main originality was the notion of 'participatory democracy', which led her to hold a series of meetings in which she mainly 'listened' to members of the public. While initially praised as proof of innovativeness and openness, it soon became clear that this would lead to no major policy proposals. In the final confrontation with Sarkozy, her 'openness' could easily be interpreted as 'evasiveness', as when Sarkozy challenged her on reform of the 35-hour week. Whereas the right-wing candidate seemed to have clear ideas, Royal repeatedly answered that she would let the 'social partners' (employers' and workers' representatives) negotiate changes to the law, while refusing to say which changes she thought were necessary. On a series of major issues, Royal often seemed content to reiterate general principles and vaunt the superiority of her 'values'.

On the fundamental questions of economic policy and liberalization, Royal's policies differed little from those of Sarkozy. Indeed, Sarkozy managed to sound more determined to 'save' French industry from threats of relocation than the Socialist candidate. On taxation, Sarkozy attacked the Socialists' alleged commitment to redistributing rather than producing wealth, and his pledge to impose a tax ceiling for high-income earners was a clear enough indication of where his main loyalties lie. However, many voters fell for his arguments about high levels of taxation discouraging initiative and encouraging the flight of entrepreneurs.

The mainstream left opposition singularly failed, then, to counter propaganda in favour of free-market economic policy, not because of poor communication or tactical mistakes, but because it fundamentally shares such assumptions. This adaptation to 'liberalism' can be expected to continue. Royal herself is prepared to mastermind this conversion to 'economic realism', but other leaders, such as former economics minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn, are even clearer in their intention to purge the party of its few remaining references to the need to transform society.

On matters of democracy and political representation, Royal fared little better. Her policies of limiting elected politicians to a single function, devolving more powers to the regions, increasing the prerogatives of parliament, introducing a 'degree' of proportionality to the electoral system and creating popular 'juries' to assess politicians' performance represent very limited democratic reforms of the state. Sarkozy's vision of a highly centralized, even authoritarian, state and his Gaullist view of the presidency, while chilling for defenders of human rights, had greater appeal to French voters tired of unkept promises and influenced by incessant talk of 'national decline'.

On racism and immigration, as on the treatment of young offenders, Royal's more 'compassionate' stance could not hide the fact that here too there was a wide measure of agreement between the two candidates. The Socialist candidate's response to Sarkozy's rhetoric on the subject of national identity was to start singing the Marseillaise at the end of meetings and encourage people to fly the French tricolour. On the question of undocumented immigrants, Royal failed to attack Sarkozy's hard line as Interior Minister head on, and the two candidates agreed that the problem should be dealt with 'case by case'. On voting rights for non-European immigrants, both agreed that there was a case for according such rights in municipal elections. Sarkozy's advocacy of harsher punishment for offenders was matched by Royal's early talk of military-style treatment centres for young offenders and a policy of 'zero tolerance' and restoration of traditional values. Only Royal's commitment to legalizing gay unions (a late conversion, as it happens) contrasted with Sarkozy's more reactionary views.

The problems on the Left are unlikely to go away. Indeed, we may witness further implosion both on the parliamentary and the radical Left (also in a parlous state) in the months to come. But history is not written in advance, and the French working-class and student movements have proved particularly hard nuts to crack in the past.