

## 4.4.2017 French Presidential elections. The finishing straight

The 2017 presidential race will go down in history as the most disappointing since the early days of General De Gaulle's Fifth Republic. There is a deep disconnect between the institution and the people who will be going to the polls in less than a month's time.

This disconnect is likely to be reflected in a very low turnout, and a surge in protest voting will express the rejection of political frameworks which have struggled to reinvent themselves. The political parties are now primarily "politician factories", with palace intrigues and revolutions, no longer generating either ideas or dynamism.

The primaries were supposed to give them a boost, but have self-evidently been counter-productive. For those who took part, sometimes in huge numbers as in the case of the right which voted for François Fillon, there is a general feeling of having been fooled. That such a storm of deals and revelations about recurrent deceits should in a few short weeks have struck this plaster saint of a politician, elected as the antithesis of the diabolical Nicolas Sarkozy, makes plain the failure of a measure designed to "give a voice to the electorate", which simply felt conned.

On the left, the primary vote set aside the issues posed by the government in favour of an anti-authority approach. But the chosen candidate, Benoît Hamon, is faced with the defection of his competitors in the primary to his rival Emmanuel Macron. Once again, the primary represents a failure, unable to unite the candidates behind the winner. And, failure upon failure, the rallying cry of the environmental candidate ended by weakening a political force which internal rivalries have wiped from the political landscape.

The Socialist Party will inevitably pay the price of its inability to unite behind its candidate. The Republicans are severely weakened by the disrepute attaching to theirs. French political life will emerge drained from the spring 2017 elections.

Suddenly, the standing of 'independent' candidates has soared. Jean Luc Mélenchon is winning the media race and imposing his robust populist humour on a left that has lost all sense of direction. The protest vote is uniting around him, and he has definitively swept aside a Communist Party which is just a shadow of its former self. His next objective is to launch a takeover bid on the Socialist Party. If he can supplant Benoît Hamon he'll have succeeded.

The other candidate flying high in the polls is Emmanuel Macron. It must be said that between a right that is veering far to the right and a left whose candidate is positioned a long way to the left, the alliance with François Bayrou has opened the way for Macron. The leap forward in the polls in its wake tells you all you need to know. This flawless procession towards the presidency is carrying someone who looked like a political novice just a few short months ago to the brink of victory. He is the 'moderate' who is attracting support alike from those sceptical about the glorious day and from conservatives with no taste for political upheaval. And this prudent ideology is quite obviously supported by a majority in society.

The upward trajectory of Marine Le Pen has suddenly run out of steam. Confronted by the far right, Europe is playing for its future this year in three elections: in the Netherlands, in France and in Germany. In the Netherlands Marine Le Pen's allies have suffered a defeat. After the somewhat unexpected outcome of the Austrian presidential election at the end of 2016, when the far right lost a vote which it was widely expected to win, this may be a further sign of the retreat of anti-European ideas in Europe. The main issue at stake in the French election will be whether or not this retreat is confirmed, leaving Marine Le Pen trailing in a second round which she now seems certain to reach. If that is all it achieves, the French presidential election will not have been entirely in vain.

PS: the characters in the drawing are not all up to date, but the dynamics of the race are spot on!