

Fantasies of Worth: Macron's French Mission. The Fifth Republic in Permanent Decline

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The outcome of the French presidential elections did not suggest a France on the verge of rapid, vigorous renewal. It suggested the opposite, a state in atrophy, the Fifth Republic in terminal decline before unleashed historical forces.

Dejected, voters feared by way of a majority that Marine Le Pen was simply too potent to be catapulted into the Élysée Palace on May 7. A coalition of sentiment and convenience converged, giving the 39-year-old opportunist a chance to market himself as France's saviour.

For all that, Emmanuel Macron still did not convince the twelve million who swooped to Le Pen, or the four million who preferred to destroy their ballot papers in a huff of disapproval of both candidates in the runoff election. Hardly peanuts from the perspective of voter behaviour.

And marketing himself Macron is. Essential to this campaign is an effort to link victory to a broader, European, if not global one. (When France is in internal crisis, it often looks to save the causes of others.)

"The world needs what the French have always taught. For decades France has doubted herself." Such self-doubt can hardly be a terrible thing, putting the brake on overly patriotic, and parochial measures. But not for Macron, who promises that his mandate would give back to the French the confidence "to believe in themselves", to effectively convince the world that French power, far from being on the decline to some retirement home of geopolitics, was on "the brink of a great renaissance."

This hardly seemed to be the case, given the admitted fracture on the president's part of France's political fabric, and the state of emergency that keeps the state apparatchiks busy. Since 2015, the Fifth Republic continues to live in a state that made Macron speak of "a living fraternity" open and welcoming, rather than private and fearful. Such vague calls cry out for evidence, though Macron had better things to worry about.

He will have much convincing to do. One will be to inject his En Marche! Movement – now named République en marche – into Parliamentary elections, again humming the theme of centrist wisdom. To garner victory, he will need a majority of the 577-seat National Assembly through issuing a siren call for defections. On Monday, Macron published a list of 511 candidates for the June legislative ballot.

Short of that, the prospects of La Cohabitation with a prime minister of different political persuasion may be in order, one where the leader in the lower chamber is approved by

majority. Such situations have previously led to an un-greasing of the pathway of policy reform, and stress a distribution of power away from the executive to the parliament.



So far, Macron's man for the prime minister's office is Édouard Philippe, mayor of Le Havre and of the Les Républicains party. He has indicated that, in all manner of things, one may well lean, when required, to the left of politics or the right. (Do we sense here a French variant of the British "wobbler"?)

What matters to Philippe are issues of economic freedom and "freedom of thought, freedom of expression." [1] He concedes to being right wing, "and yet the general interest must be to dictate the engagement of the state, of elected officials and of the citizen."

As of Macron, Philippe was not entirely convinced prior to his appointment that the soufflé had come together quite as promised. There was little doubt, in his mind, that new President had the "power of seduction and reformist rhetoric," but he could hardly be compared on the charm metre to a John F. Kennedy.

None of these views detract from the visible fact that Macron's choice is very much one that seeks to court establishment values, whilst sending teasing signals to the conservatives. Bruno Retailleau of the French senate smelled an enormous rat, suggesting that Macron had moved to weaken "the right in the parliamentary elections."

Reform, it would seem, is being promised from within the establishment, making use of traditional figures to bring about a change. Philippe's party is that of the old guard, of Nicolas Sarkozy and failed, disgraced presidential candidate François Fillon. As Le Pen suggested, with some substance and disdain, the nomination of Philippe is telling on one level, that of a "perfect summary of the last 10 years in France". The forces of the traditional left and right, in other words, would continue to have the dance of State.

To add some padding to these tactics, Macron is also facing a range of decisions on how to pursue the "road map" of European change with the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. On the one hand, the centrist wants greater EU centralisation within the euro bloc, not to mention that headache of headaches, a budget; on the other, he wishes to quell technocratic urges and trim unneeded bureaucracy.

What, then, should this suggest? A policy of a "Europe of two circles," one capitalising on Brexit, has been suggested by Macron's economic aide and mastermind, Jean Pisani-Ferry, along with traditional observance of the EU-imposed public deficit limit. Given what is currently happening to the unfortunate continent, he might as well go for three, all turbulent, concentric, and in need of severe repair.

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Note

[1]

http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2017/05/15/edouard-philippe-le-maire-les-republicains-du-havre-nomme-premier-ministre_5127912_823448.html

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