

The French Malaise

ANDREW McINTYRE

AFTER the surprise result of the first round of the Presidential election in France, there was a torrent of panic reminiscent of the reactions in our local press to Pauline Hanson—and for much the same reasons.

Things simmered down somewhat when it was realized that Le Pen got through to the final round because the Left voted for the Trotskyist candidates numbers one, two and three, a couple of nutty ecologists and the unreformed Stalinist Communist Party of France. The Left's self-loathing reached a delicious peak with much sobbing and gnashing of teeth in public.

In France, one finds nearly half the population voting for crackpot extremists of both shades in one of the world's most educated and sophisticated democracies. Even Serge July, the founder of the radical Left newspaper *Libération*, was led to exclaim, 'France is a disoriented, panicky country, which is scared of its own shadow, which finds it hard to turn towards the future'. It is, in fact, a mix of Leftist anti-capitalist globophobia on the one hand, and a hardening against uncontrolled, inassimilable immigration on the other.

The traditional anti-capitalist feelings in France are both cultural and historical in origin. They relate, in part, to a supposed Anglo-Saxon hegemony, both economic and strategic, simmering from the days of the Cold War and France's desire to go it alone outside NATO, and intellectual tradition.

Jean-François Revel, in his most recent book, *Les Plats de Saison*, underlines the importance of Leftist thinking in France. With the disappearance of the Eastern Bloc, it is now possible to dream of an alternative to economic liberalism without facing

'real society'. The hard Left, the far Right and the trade unions, unlike in the English-speaking world, constitute a *majority* in France. Although there has, admittedly, been extensive privatization by stealth and a reduction in labour costs—economic rationalism, the 'Anglo-Saxon disease' is indeed encroaching on the *exception française*—the French cannot admit it. Mr Jospin, when Prime Minister, never 'privatized', he 'opened public companies to capital'. The conservative President Chirac said two years ago that 'globalization was a cause of world poverty'. Since his re-election, he has emphasized the importance of 'controlling globalization'.

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Illegal and violent protests are an accepted part of the way in which the French do things. Anti-capitalist demonstrators demanded free tickets to take the train to Nice to disrupt the European summit, and the Transport Minister offered them a 50 per cent reduction. 'It is a revolution subsidized by those against whom it is directed', comments Revel. The hateful anti-American, anti-globalization 'farmer', José Bové, is treated as a national hero for trashing a McDonalds. Faith in markets is equated with *ultra-liberalisme* in France. Remember

that the first Mitterand Cabinet in 1981 had four communist ministers, when the CPF attracted 25 per cent of the votes!

Contributing to French paranoia is a relative decline in France's wealth, sliding from 14th to 17th in the OECD, a diminishing role in the EU with the reunification of Germany and the prospect of a flood of new members from the East. Young French professionals are flocking to London where there are jobs and a future.

As for immigration, Hervé Alglarondo, in a new book, *Securité: La Gauche Contre le Peuple*, explains that, for the Left-wing intelligentsia, criminals of immigrant origin now take the cherished notional place of the old proletariat, and that they are valued in proportion to the intensity of their hatred for French society.

Le Pen has been the only one to speak up. 'Socialist ministers had been talking about making immigration rules more flexible. And here we are with young north Africans turning to fundamentalist Islam, with immigrants who were once integrated un-integrating themselves, and our crime problem escalating out of all proportion—and no one is talking about it.'

Chirac has listened and appears to have responded to the concerns of the electorate. And, like Hanson in Australia, Le Pen has disappeared. It remains to be seen, however, if he has the courage to do what he promised; it goes against the national grain. Berlusconi's Italy has just moved to the Left in municipal elections. The idea that Europe is moving comfortably to the Right may yet be premature.

Andrew McIntyre is Public Relations Manager at the Institute of Public Affairs.

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