

Liberalism in France

The political background to Emmanuel Macron's election as French President explored;
by Michael Steed

En Marche! A New Dawn for



EMMANUEL MACRON'S STUNNING victory in the French presidential election has potentially profound implications. The vote in France in 2017 is already being hailed as a critical juncture in contemporary history – the turning of the tide of authoritarian populist nationalism that surged with the 2016 Brexit and Trump victories and the near victory in Austria of a neo-Nazi presidential candidate. Macron's platform was undoubtedly a reassertion of humanitarian, internationalist, liberal and rationalist values. But did he owe his victory to that platform?

It is too soon, in a journal devoted to history, to attempt a full assessment of the implications of the election. But it is worth examining Macron's success with them in mind. Specifically, for this British journal, the centrism that Macron led to victory in France appears to have enough in common with the successive surges in electoral support for the Liberals, Alliance and Liberal Democrats to merit closer examination. Macron

himself tried to avoid a 'centrist' tag, saying in 2016–7 that he was neither of the left nor of the right, though he had earlier (see below) claimed to be of the left.

He preferred, along with many supporters of *En Marche!*, to claim to be rallying progressive forces from both right and left against the conservatism of older ideologies and parties – a positioning remarkably similar to Jo Grimond's in the 1950s. A part of that approach was to present his political career, the movement he launched in April 2016 and the presidential campaign he launched in November 2016 more as demonstrations of energy and action than essays in political language. Not for nothing had he fallen in love at school with his drama teacher, whose guidance lit up his successful bid for the French presidency.

In this manner, *En Marche!* was presented as a twenty-first-century answer to the problems of a country beset by irrelevant, historic party lines. Yet it has many less successful precursors. We will

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therefore examine the relevant French historic and institutional context, the precise character of this dramatic revival of leftist centrism in France and the particular reasons why it has succeeded where previous, similar efforts failed. This article will take the story to the end of January 2017, when the field of competitors for the presidency became established, and Macron's victory was therefore a likelihood.

Left, right and centre in the Third (1871–1940) and Fourth (1944–58) Republics

The French Fifth Republic had previously been unkind to attempts to win power for the political centre. It inherited from its predecessors a strong sense of a left–right divide, dating back to the French Revolution, which had dominated electoral politics in the Third and Fourth Republics. However, during the nearly ninety years of those two republics, although votes were cast along well-trodden left–right lines,

France was often governed from the centre. There was never a two-party system along the lines established in Britain from 1868, rather two loose blocs of left and right. Many of the hallmarks of modern democracy – mass male suffrage, vigorous free debate, rival political ideologies and the overturning of governments by parliament or the electorate – arrived early in France; however one hallmark – the modern, structured, mass-membership political party – did not. Until its collapse in 1940, political formations in the Third Republic were more like the loose overlapping assemblages of Whigs, Tories, Radicals and Peelites that dominated British politics in the mid-nineteenth century.

French electoral systems (see Box 1) make for complex political choices, and have encouraged an unusual sophistication in the French electorate. Tactical voting was always widespread and became instinctive. Individual, often locally entrenched, personalities found they could face both ways, and both left and right blocs included

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groups prepared to deal with moderate elements in the opposite camp.

So, as the Radicals (see Box 2), dominant from the left for much of the Third Republic, were pushed towards the centre ground by the rise of first the Socialist Party (SFIO) and then the soon-to-be powerful Communist Party, their descendents in the 1920s and 1930s were able to maintain a key role in government formation even though – or perhaps by – dividing, reuniting and redividing as they formed appropriate alliances. Their success was in stark contrast to the fate of the British Liberal Party, whose divisions in 1918–23 and from 1931 on profoundly weakened it, pushing it to the sidelines of government. This contrast led many political scientists to conclude that the key difference lay in the voting system. If the UK had adopted the two-ballot system (favoured by many British radicals in the late nineteenth century) or the alternative vote (which later became the preferred minor reform of British Liberals), might the British equivalent of the French Radicals have been able to remain as key to government formation as their French counterparts did?

The similarity between the British Liberal and French Radical parties was more profound than both being pushed to the centre by the rise of class-based parties to their left. Both had been the parties of democratic reform in the nineteenth century, challenging conservative ideology and privileged classes and institutions. They had borrowed ideas and names; liberal as a political word had come into English from Spanish via French while radical had been used politically in Britain before it was in France. Their differences lay more in their opponents. British conservatism was relatively pragmatic and the British aristocracy ultimately prepared to hand over power peacefully (as the House of Lords did in 1910–11); the French monarchy and supporting Catholic Church, however, was more ready to dig itself in and more ideologically challenging. So French radicalism defined itself as republican, a word which in French is more about democratic legitimacy and respect for constitutional process than whether the head of state is hereditary. It also championed not just (as Liberals did) removal of all legal disqualifications on grounds of religion, but a positive view of the state as secular, or *laïcité*. The main battleground for this had been national education, which remained a deeply divisive issue during the Fourth Republic. However, by this stage the Radicals' effective opponents had become larger political parties.

Electoral politics were by then dominated by newer, well-organised mass parties – Communist, Socialist and Christian Democrat (MRP), soon joined by a strong Gaullist party. Both the old Radicals and the old Conservatives, however, survived and, because of their strategic positions in the party system, provided more prime ministers between 1945 and 1958 than any of the more

modern parties. Indeed, though becoming more dependent on electoral support in rural fringes of France, especially the southwest (which could be seen, like British Liberalism's dependence on the Celtic fringe, as the hallmark of a historic party in decline), the Radical Party's leadership was dramatically rejuvenated. Radical premiers included both the most memorably dynamic of the Fourth Republic, Pierre Mendès-France (1954–5), and France's youngest political leader since Napoleon, Félix Gaillard, who took office in 1957, a day after his thirty-eighth birthday.

The MRP, reflecting a social Catholic tradition that looked to the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) for inspiration, set out to provide a 'third way' between capitalism and Marxism. In many European countries, such as Germany, sectarian parties were pushed by electoral

Box 1: Electoral systems

France employs a variety of voting and counting rules, periodically tweaked to achieve a political purpose. Most are conducted by two-round majoritarian systems, with effects similar but not identical to British single-round plurality systems. These include a push towards a stark two-way choice at the second round, an exaggeration of voting majorities and discrimination against minority political parties (or viewpoints), unless their support is geographically clustered. The main difference is that the French first round allows such smaller parties to stand, testing their strength, before aligning themselves with larger allies at the second round.

However, the French rules for who goes forward to the second round vary; the presence of a smaller rival in the first round sometimes blocks a larger party's entry to the second round. Hence, with this blackmail power, smaller parties can be persuaded not to contest some constituencies at the first round in return for a free run in other seats. That has long encouraged French parties to form alliances, a behaviour which extends to plurinomial (multi-member) elections by list. Thus in both municipal and regional elections, lists compete at the first round for enough votes to get through to the second one. At the second round the strongest list (or combination of lists which competed at the first but then fused) gets an overall majority of seats, with the rest allocated proportionally. When in December 2015, the Front National topped the first round in several regions, other parties' lists were fused or withdrawn to prevent the FN coming top in three-cornered contests and receiving the majority bonus.

The French national assembly is (and departmental councils were) elected in uninominal constituencies, as with the House of Commons. But as each candidate has a suppléant who will take their seats in certain circumstances, two-party combinations can stand. For the 2014 departmental council elections, binomial constituencies with exact gender parity were used; all candidates stood as male/female pairs, each with gender appropriate suppléants. This provides further opportunities for inter-party linked candidatures.

The presidential contest is purely uninominal, with the strict rule that only the top two proceed to the second round. The shock of Jean-Marie Le Pen getting through to the second round in 2002, with only 16.9 per cent, has meant that subsequent election campaigns have focused on whether to vote at the first round for candidates with an eye to who will make it to second, the much discussed vote utile (a form of the British tactical squeeze).

Most presidential candidates in 2017 favoured reform of parliamentary elections, to a partly or wholly proportional system.

Box 2: Political parties

The Radical Party, France's oldest political party (founded 1901), sometimes known simply as *Parti radical*, or occasionally as PRRRS from its original full title (*Parti républicain, radical et radical-socialiste*), or as *Parti radical valoisien* (whenever it split, possession of the party HQ in the Place de Valois was the key to legitimacy).

The Socialist Party was founded as the *Section française de l'internationale ouvrière* (SFIO) following a decision by the Socialist (Second) International in 1904 that two squabbling French Socialist groups should amalgamate. In 1969, the SFIO was relaunched as the *Parti Socialiste* (PS), which merged with a small party lead by Francois Mitterrand in 1971.

At the 1920 SFIO congress, most members broke away to form a party obedient to the Third (Communist) International, which became the French Communist Party, now a small fringe party but stronger than the SFIO from 1945 to 1981.

The Christian Democrat *Mouvement républicain populaire* (MRP) was formed out of previous groups in 1945, relaunched as the *Centre démocrate* in 1965 and continued under various labels until its successor was relaunched as *MoDem* in 2007. It is not to be confused with right-wing mini-parties using the Christian Democrat epithet.

Gaullist and Conservative parties change their names regularly, often shedding or adding members of smaller right-wing parties as they do so. Sometimes known in French as *Modérés* or *Indépendants*, they also often use words like *libéral* (whose meaning in French is closer to 'economic liberal' in English) *populaire* or *républicain* but never the word *conservateur*. The present party *Les Républicains* (LR) was the renaming chosen by Sarkozy in 2015 for what had been the UMP, formed in 2002 to bring Gaullists and Conservatives together in a single party.

Mouvement Réformateur (MR) was the 1973 umbrella label for the *Parti radical valoisien* and the *Centre démocrate*.

The *Mouvement des Radicaux de Gauche* (now *Parti Radical de Gauche*, PRG) broke away from the Radicals in 1973.

The *Union pour la Démocratie Française* (UDF) was originally an umbrella label for a wing of the Conservatives, the *Parti radical valoisien* and the *Centre démocrate*. It eventually became a party, having shed most of its member parties.

Le Nouveau Centre (now *Les Centristes*) is a right-of-centre splinter party.

Mouvement Démocratique (*MoDem*) was launched in 2007, replacing the UDF.

The *Union des Démocrates et Indépendants* (UDI) was an umbrella party formed in 2012, which includes the *Parti radical valoisien* and *Les Centristes*.

competition into a place on the right. In France the MRP, because it faced both Conservative and Nationalist (i.e. Gaullist) opponents to its right, succeeded in positioning itself as a more centrist party and provided the foreign minister in most Fourth Republic cabinets. The MRP was strongly in favour of European integration, along with most Radicals and socialists, and used its pivotal strength to bring France fully into this process, against Communist, Gaullist and some Conservative opposition. That fault line, between the pro-European centre and the *souverainistes* of the political right and left, which was established in the late 1940s, persists and was very evident in the 2017 campaign.

Thus in the mid-twentieth century, the Radicals and the MRP were playing key, and similar, roles both in France's embracing of the European idea and in the establishment of the particular French mixture of market economy, state management and social security. These issues defined the political centre in France. In contrast, at the European level their links were different. French Radicals had played a leading part in establishing an inter-war *entente internationale* of similar parties, including British Liberals, and were involved in its successor, the Liberal International, founded in 1947. However, the political connotations of the French word *libéral* were more conservative than its English homonym, and the LI became, over time, distinctly less francophone. The MRP more naturally found its place in the *Nouvelles Équipes Internationales*, the Christian Democrat equivalent of LI, and also founded in 1947. It followed that, as political groups were formed in what was later to become the European Parliament, the Radicals and the MRP were also separated. However, an added complication was that at first French Conservatives and (until they formed a group of their own in 1963) Gaullists chose to become allied to the Liberal group. Many years later, as the French right came together domestically, both Conservative and Gaullist traditions found a more natural home in what is now the European Peoples Party.

The Fifth Republic

Major constitutional changes in 1958 and 1962 moved the focus of French politics to a popularly elected president. This has trapped both centrist forces. Until 2017, the presidency was monopolised by two political forces: the dominant Gaullists, steadily broadening from 1974 into a conventional conservative party, and an increasingly strong Socialist party. But centrism, like the UK Liberal Party, refused to die. At the first (1965) presidential election, Jean Lecanuet, the MRP leader, launched his candidature supported by some Radical figures such as Maurice Faure, though the Radical Party itself backed Mitterrand (standing as the sole voice of the left; he had previously worked closely with the Radicals). Lecanuet, using modern marketing methods (with many similarities to Macron's style in 2017), was branded as the French Kennedy, polled 16 per cent and unexpectedly forced de Gaulle to a second ballot. But the demographics of his vote did not reflect that modernity; rather it peaked in those rural areas with a strong Catholic tradition, which happened also to be where French farmers feared de Gaulle would upset the Common Agricultural Policy. He only did well in one large city, Lyon. At the second round, Lecanuet's vote split fairly evenly between de Gaulle and Mitterrand, pointing to the inherent difficulty for centrism of a two-ballot system.

Then, in 1970, the Radicals staged a brief dramatic revival when they co-opted a new leader, the high-profile journalist Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, who won a by-election at Nancy in Lorraine, hailed by some as a French Orpington.

In 1969 Alain Poher, the centrist president of the senate (with an MRP background), stood against the inheritor of de Gaulle's mantle, Pompidou; centrism nearly made a comeback. The Radical Party backed him; he polled 23 per cent, spread more evenly across France than Lecanuet's vote; and went into the second round. But the Communists, who were then far stronger than the Socialists, successfully commanded their flock to abstain and consequently Poher lost. He never formed a party.

Then, in 1970, the Radicals staged a brief dramatic revival when they co-opted a new leader, the high-profile journalist Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, who won a by-election at Nancy in Lorraine, hailed by some as a French Orpington.¹ However, at the 1973 legislative elections, centrism went down fighting what many judged would prove to be its last independent battle. Lecanuet and Servan-Schreiber joined forces to form the *Mouvement Réformateur* (MR) but their campaign behaviour prefigured the 1987 'two Davids' fiasco. The MR polled just 12.6 per cent of the vote, less than its two components previously achieved separately; the bulk of its thirty-four deputies won their seats in more traditionally right-wing (i.e. usually strongly Catholic) areas, dependent on more conservative-minded voters at the second ballot.

Meanwhile, the majority of outgoing Radical deputies, who had mostly been elected in the 1960s as anti-Gaullists with the aid of third-placed Socialist or Communist voters (typically in the rural southwest) had seen the writing on the electoral wall and refused the MR ticket. They broke from the main party, forming the *Mouvement des Radicaux de Gauche*, having signed the Common Programme of the left in November 1972. The MRG was very much, in size, the junior partner in this alliance, led by Georges Marchais for the Communists, Francois Mitterand for the Socialists and the MRG leader Robert Fabre, who became known as its Third Man. He maintained a sturdy independence in positioning his party as of the left, but a left more broadly defined than by the two larger partners. Fabre was an archetypal local politician from a small town in the rural department of Aveyron, Villefranche de Rouergues. He was born there in 1915, served the town as a local pharmacist, was its mayor for thirty years and deputy for eighteen, yet rose to serving his country as a member of its Constitutional Council (1986–95). His career epitomises the deep roots of French Radicalism.

The MRG, after several name changes now called *Parti Radical de Gauche* (PRG), has occasionally put up a presidential candidate or run a separate list at European elections, but always done a deal with the Socialists for seats in the National Assembly. A somewhat quixotic tilt was made at the presidency in 1981 by the leader who succeeded Fabre, Michel Crépeau, the mayor of another south-western town, La Rochelle. It was

supported by a 283-page manifesto *L'avenir en face*,² which sought to show how radical philosophy was of the left but different from the socialist left. The party still retains a certain strength in south-west France³ (also Corsica) – in local government and also in the local-councillor elected senate – but its results in nationwide elections suggests a remaining core support of only around 2 per cent.

The Radical split proved permanent. Servan-Schreiber and the MR swung behind a modernising Conservative, Giscard d'Estaing, at the 1974 presidential election. The official *valoisien* Radical Party (see Box 2) has never fought independently again, surviving mainly where it has strong local personalities, particularly in a few towns in eastern France, and has seen its meagre fortunes fluctuate with the ups and downs of presidential figures from the right. For nearly three decades it linked with ex-MRP groups and sometimes Conservatives in a *Union pour la Démocratie Française* (UDF). While Giscard d'Estaing was president (till 1981), the UDF prospered; but when he left the domestic political scene, it shed both member-parties and votes as most of the right increasingly came together in a single main party, renamed *Les Républicains* (LR) in 2015.

However, some of the centrist Christian Democrat tradition went down another political path. In 1969, the SFIO was relaunched as a renovated *Parti Socialiste* (PS), shedding some of its historic anti-clericalism; meanwhile the main body of Christian Democrat trades unionism dropped the Christian epithet and moved closer to the PS. The electoral change was most marked in Brittany, which had traditionally voted more on the right and where French Christian Democracy developed earlier, in the 1930s. The new PS slowly absorbed the social Catholic tendency here; its vote has steadily climbed in Brittany until by the election of the regional assemblies in December 2015, the vote for the PS, led by Yves Le Drian (Hollande's defence minister), made this the most Socialist region in France.

So over the next six presidential elections, from 1981, when Mitterand ousted Giscard d'Estaing, to 2012, when Hollande ousted Sarkozy, the various survivors of France's old centrist parties were loosely cemented into right and left blocs. There were a few attempts to break out, mostly from within the right-wing camp, which partly pre-figure the Macronite movement of 2016–7.

Francois Bayrou

As pressure grew on the UDF to be absorbed into the main party of the right, the leadership of the resistance fell to Francois Bayrou. Coming from another part of France where a locally strong Christian Democrat tradition was mutually reinforced by local cultural distinctiveness, Bearn (Pyrénées Atlantiques), Bayrou is a practising

Catholic who has championed a progressive, human-rights-based form of his tradition – in 2009, for example, he denounced Pope Benedict's pronouncements on the role of condoms as a protection against AIDS as 'unacceptable'. But along with his tradition, he is passionately in favour of European integration and a supporter of private (i.e. Catholic) education. From this background, he naturally entered politics from the right, and at the 1990 St Malo convention of his party, which it set out its long-term thinking, he advocated for a distinctive, personalist contribution to the role of a market economy.⁴

In 1993, he became a young (at 41) minister of education under first Balladur and then Juppé as prime minister, and sought to reconcile France's historic educational battle, supporting state aid to private schools whilst also promoting the principle of *laïcité*. In 1998, he took over leadership of the UDF, seeking to change it from a federation of small parties into a more unified, membership-based party. At first, this had little impact, and in the 2002 presidential election he was an also-ran with under 7 per cent, less than half Lecanuet's vote a generation earlier.

But Bayrou battled on as a deputy, increasingly critical of Chirac's presidency and shedding UDF members who wanted to stay within the right bloc umbrella – a breakaway group seeking to keep closer to the right-formed *Le Nouveau Centre* (renamed *Les Centristes* at a special congress on 11 December 2016). In May 2006, he voted with a Socialist censure motion on a money-laundering scandal (the Clairstream affair), following which the TV networks, for time-keeping balance, tried to classify him as 'opposition'. Bayrou stood his ground, successfully insisting he was independent of both government and opposition, and had a second go at the presidency in 2007. The opinion polls picked up a rising trend, and for a period the campaign news story became whether he could overtake the Socialist candidate and get through to the second round. He peaked in January; an average of the polls in that month gave him 22 per cent, compared with 28 per cent for the UMP's Sarkozy and 24 per cent for the Socialist Royale.

Thereafter Sarkozy (with 31.2 per cent at the first round in April) and Royale (with 25.9 per cent) squeezed him down to 18.6 per cent, nonetheless a massive swing to Bayrou of 11.8 points compared with 2002. Flushed with that surge, he at once launched a fresh centrist party with modern panache – the *Mouvement Démocratique*, to be called MoDem rather than a set of initials – with an emphasis on political reform (clean government, proportional representation, etc.) rather similar to Nick Clegg's platform of 2010. But the tendency of the French to let the outcome of the presidential vote influence their parliamentary choice meant that in the June 2007 parliamentary elections the MoDem vote sank to 7.6 per cent and it won just four seats – including Bayrou and his locally

popular Bearnais neighbour, Jean Lassalle, who was later to stand in 2017.

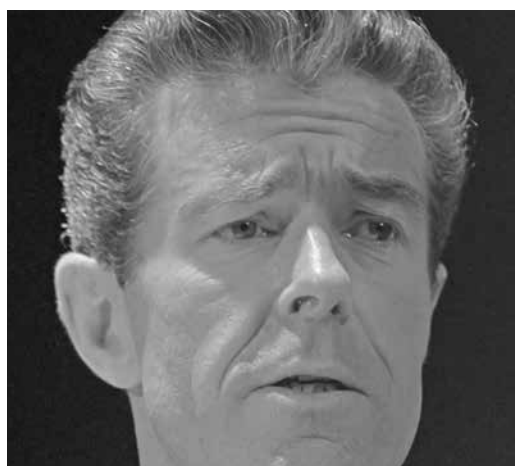
MoDem polled 8.4 per cent at the 2009 European elections, reinforcing the Liberal (ALDE) group in the European Parliament with six MEPs. This marked the point at which, at the European level, the logic of a domestic, strongly pro-European, centrist position finally brought French centrism firmly into the EP Liberal camp; the twenty-nine-strong French UMP contingent (with 28 per cent of the vote), mixing Gaullist and Conservative traditions, with both pro-EU and Eurosceptic viewpoints, sat with the right. However, MoDem found it difficult to build secure roots in France – only winning a scattering of seats on local councils by forming local alliances. Bayrou became a leading critic of President Sarkozy's style, advocating a more responsible financial policy to tackle France's rising public deficit and increasingly sounding like an isolated prophet of doom rather than a political leader. On his third run for the presidency in 2012, he was eclipsed by the revival of the Le Pen vote and the first dramatic impact of Jean-Luc Mélenchon (an ex-PS minister, standing independently on an anti-austerity platform), dropping to fifth with just 9.1 per cent. He supported Hollande at the second round, then lost his seat in the National Assembly in a rare three-cornered second round fight, while MoDem sank to two deputies – Lassalle and a surprise victor from the Indian Ocean (who joined the PRG group in the Assembly). The electoral system and two-party dominance seemed to have quashed MoDem.

Jean-Louis Borloo

Other centrists stuck with the right bloc, so maintaining a parliamentary presence. Best known amongst them was Jean-Louis Borloo, who has led a remarkably varied career and is currently, having retired from politics, promoting electrification in Africa. A former chief scout, he came into politics via an unusual route – a high-earning commercial lawyer who was called in to save the local football team in Valenciennes (a rust-belt town near the Belgian border) in 1986, which he did. He then formed a non-party list to contest the mayoralty of Valenciennes in 1989, winning it with a remarkable 76 per cent. During his period governing the town, he received national attention for his success in attracting jobs and reducing the town's unemployment. Forming ad hoc alliances with ecologists and the UDF he progressed to become MEP in 1989, just failed to become a centrist/green president of his region in 1992, and became a deputy in 1993 and then an energetic and telegenic national minister (with a distinctive bouffant hair style, pre-figuring Boris Johnson's) in successive right bloc governments 2002–10.

In 2002 he was a leading supporter of Bayrou, then fell out with him and joined the Radical

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Jean Lecanuet
(1920–93)
Jean-Jacques Servan-
Schreiber (1924–2006)
Francois Bayrou
(1951–)
Jean-Louis Borloo
(1951–)

Party, was co-opted to be its joint leader in 2003 and elected its sole leader in 2005. After MoDem's failure at the 2007 legislative elections, he was widely seen as the obvious centrist presidential candidate for 2012, regularly picked in the polls as one of the most popular and effective ministers, identified with important measures in urban renovation and in combating climate change. But in November 2011 he withdrew his name and gave support (against Bayrou) to Sarkozy in 2012.

Re-elected a deputy with a strong personal vote in Valenciennes in June 2012, Borloo set about bringing together deputies elected from the *Nouveau Centre*, the Radical Party and five mini-parties to form the *Union des Démocrates et Indépendants* (UDI). During the 2012–17 Assembly, the UDI was the third largest parliamentary group. The UMP had stood down for these deputies, but it was still evident that such centrists could draw a few critical votes that a UMP candidate could not.⁵ In contrast to the legendary fissiparity of centrist politics (Bayrou once memorably likened leading a group of centrists to pushing a wheelbarrow full of frogs jumping in all directions), Borloo's UDI stuck together throughout Hollande's five years.

A rapprochement with Bayrou followed: on 5 November 2013 Borloo and Bayrou signed an accord under the title 'The Alternative'. This provided for a joint MoDem–UDI list in the 2014 European elections and envisaged the same in the 2015 regional elections, to be followed by an open centrist primary for the 2017 presidential contest. Borloo claimed this expressed his personal commitment 'in the social tradition of Christian Democracy, at the same time ecologist, radical and social democrat'.⁶

The Alternative met its first electoral test at the May 2014 Euro-elections; despite overtures from the UMP, it insisted on separate centrist lists, proclaiming that its conservative rivals were too divided over Europe and it alone was 'clear and coherent' in its pro-European stance. UDI–MoDem lists were labelled '*Les Européens*', with a federalist programme calling for the direct election of the EU president, social and fiscal convergence (including a common minimum wage), a carbon tax on those imports into the EU which failed to respect EU environmental standards, and a separate government and budget for the Eurozone.⁷

In May 2014, the *Front National's* dramatic success in coming top with nearly 25 per cent (up from 6.3 per cent in 2009) took the headlines, but with established parties in decline, the trend was actually both to the populist right and to the liberal centre, little noticed at the time. The UMP lists took 21 per cent (down by 7 points), PS–PRG 14 per cent (down 2.5) and the Greens 6 per cent (down 10). The MoDem–UDI lists took almost 10 per cent, 1.5 more than MoDem alone had in 2009.

However, this mild centrist success was overshadowed by the hospitalisation of

Jean-Louis Borloo, followed in April 2014 by his resignation aged 63 from all political offices. Jean-Christophe Lagarde was elected his successor as leader of the UDI, and Laurent Hénart, mayor of Nancy, as leader of the Radical Party. Neither has made a political impact remotely comparable with Borloo and they have tended to lead both the UDI and the Radicals back in the direction of maintaining electorally useful alliances to their right.

Out of parliament, Bayrou had recovered a local political base in the March 2014 municipal elections by winning the mayoralty of Pau. A year later, in the departmental elections, under a new system of binomial candidatures (see Box 1) which encouraged parties to pair up, generally the UDI linked with the UMP. In the December 2015 regional elections, joint LR (ex-UMP) and UDI tickets were joined by MoDem in most regions; MoDem harvested a small independent vote just in Burgundy-Franche Comté, with a significant pocket only in Belfort. Bayrou maintained both a steady following in the presidential polls of around 5 per cent, and thus the ear of the media as to whether he would stand in 2017 – he would if Sarkozy stood again, but not if Juppé were nominated. Whether or not to extend an arm to Bayrou became one of central issues in the LR-sponsored primary of November 2016. When Fillon unexpectedly won, Bayrou maintained an enigmatic silence about his own intentions.

Radicaux de Gauche

Meanwhile the PRG reaped the reward of its alliance to the left. Enough left-Radicals were elected in the wake of Hollande's election in 2012 to allow, with a few other deputies, a parliamentary group to be formed.⁸ Except in the new Grand Est region (where they allied with the Greens), PRG candidates in the 2015 regional elections stood on PS-led lists – winning enough seats to form their own group only in the new Occitanie region, centred on Toulouse. Hollande's PS-led governments have contained two or three Radical ministers along with, for part of the time, some Greens. Sylvia Pinel (Commerce and then Housing) was its senior minister until she stood down in February 2016 to become senior vice-president of the Occitanie regional assembly. At that point, Jean-Michel Baylet (see note 2) entered the cabinet, charged with territorial government questions, a subject on which the PRG, with its strength in local councils, has a special interest.

Under Valls, it also had two junior ministers. Annick Girardin (Development and Francophony, then Civil Service), a native of St Pierre-et-Miquelon (island remnants of French Canada), built up an impressive vote there (from 15 per cent in 2002 to 65 per cent in 2012), in France's least populous constituency. Thierry Braillard (Sport), won central Lyon in one of

The new, 36-year-old economy minister at once took over his predecessor's planned engagements, keenly followed by the media, who noted an initial uncertainty about playing the public political role followed by a very rapid learning process, as this charmer spotted how to perform.

the local upsets of the 2012 election. Under its national agreement, the PS had handed the seat to the Greens. But the Socialist mayor of Lyon, Gérard Collomb, disagreed and backed his PRG city council colleague to beat the official PS-backed candidate.

However, it is difficult to point to much that is distinctive about the Radical contribution to this coalition government – although in August 2014 the PRG ministers (along with some Socialists) blocked a cost-saving proposal from centralist-inclined Socialist ministers to abolish elected departmental councils from 2021. Rather, in the complex balancing of both rival Socialist factions and smaller coalition partners, the PRG has been part of the market-friendly tilt away from the more Marxist wing of the PS. The PS won office with a policy of higher taxation rates on the wealthy and pledges to revive the ailing economy. As unemployment (especially among the youth) stayed obstinately high and the government's poll rating steadily sunk, Hollande, in January 2014, tried to reboot his economic strategy with a *pacte de responsabilité*. This concordat joined together the main French business organisation (MEDEF) with the government in a common effort at economic revival, by offering employers reduced fiscal and social security burdens. The backroom boy on Hollande's staff responsible for it was a special advisor, Emmanuel Macron, the president's *secrétaire général adjoint*.

Emmanuel Macron

The more left-wing Socialist ministers were unhappy with this development – and with losses at the March municipal and May European elections heightening tension – the more they became restive in public. Chief among these was Arnaud Montebourg, minister for the economy, whose dissident protectionist view that ailing industries merited state subsidies, was reminiscent of the role that Tony Benn took in the 1974–9 Labour government. In late August 2014, he and Benoit Hamon, the recently appointed minister of education, burst into such open attack on their own government's austerity strategy (described as dictated by the German government) that they were both sacked. Macron took Montebourg's place in a friendly handover, as despite their policy differences they had established warm personal relations in their previous roles. The new, 36-year-old economy minister at once took over his predecessor's planned engagements, keenly followed by the media, who noted an initial uncertainty about playing the public political role followed by a very rapid learning process, as this charmer spotted how to perform. *Le Monde*, which had already paid significant attention to his senior advisory position with President Hollande in 2012, gave his ministerial advent a full-page spread as '*L'envol [takeoff] d'un libéral de gauche*'.⁹

En Marche! A New Dawn for European Liberalism?

Macron had joined the PS aged 24, though only for three years, and later spent a few years earning well as an investment banker. This last role was at once seized on by the government's opponents; the *Front National* denounced him as '*un financier technocrate*' and the Socialist left labelled him an elite banker. Macron actually came from a comfortable, professional, middle-class background in the provincial town of Amiens (he had declined an invitation to stand on the Socialist list for the Amiens town council); he had acquired an elite higher education at the *École Nationale de l'Administration* (ENA) by brains and hard work. ENA graduates have dominated French governments of both left and right to a degree that echoes the role of Eton and Oxford in British Conservatives ones – but the meritocratic elite represented by '*énarques*' is very different to the background of family wealth on the part of its British near-equivalent.

Macron had also spotted and seized his chance. In late 2008, when Hollande was an outsider for the Socialist presidential nomination, he joined the Socialist politician's team, having already been appointed rapporteur for a right-bloc government commission, presided over by Jacques Attali, which considered the need to promote economic growth in France through deregulation. Attali, a prolific writer on economic and social affairs and another *énarque*, served ten years as President Mitterand's advisor before becoming the first president of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in 1991. Attali, along with Michel Rocard, is widely cited as Macron's mentor. In a regional press interview given on his first ministerial visit, Macron himself said he was of the left, which – to him – meant 'to be effective, to recreate conditions favouring investment, production and innovation ... To be left is to be responsible, it is not to posture'.¹⁰ That set the tone for a brief, galvanising ministerial career.

The '*loi Macron*'

The new minister's name was soon well known. It fell to him to promote the government's next flagship bill, a lengthy and complex economic reform bill based on the Attali commission's report, which became known simply as the '*loi Macron*'. Its full name ('law for economic growth, activity and equality of opportunity') was a slogan which covered a comprehensive list of deregulation proposals, ranging from reducing restrictions on Sunday opening and night working, freeing up the legal professions, reducing the time and cost needed for a driving licence, some denationalisations (armament manufacture, plus Lyon and Nice airports), making it easier to move accounts between banks, enabling university hospitals to operate more commercially, liberalising of bus routes and easing of some building regulations (especially

in tourist zones), to promoting the issuing of free shares as a reward for success. This omnibus ragbag aroused a range of opposition – the unions were especially protective of the Sabbath, while France's notaries proclaimed that 'submitting [them] to the law of the market ... would degrade an essential public service'.

The French parliament was another problem. United, the PS only had a bare majority unless its Communist, Green and PRG allies voted with it, while the PS left wing, disturbed by the government sackings of August 2014, were ready, if not eager, to rebel. In February 2015, Prime Minister Manuel Valls decided on an autocratic but constitutional response, invoking clause 49-3 for the first time during the Hollande presidency.¹¹ Under this procedure, a French government, by making a measure a matter of confidence, ensures that only a vote of censure passed by a majority of all deputies can block it, abstentions thereby counting as supporters. Deputies of the right and centre united to vote to censure, but only six Communists and one Green joined them. Had the bill been put to the vote in its own right, centrist support might have balanced rebel Socialist opposition,¹² but Valls preferred confrontation to winning by dealing with part of the opposition. Macron let it be known that he would have preferred to win the debate and so to have won a victory in the battle of ideas. Having had its enforced first reading on 19 February 2015, the detail of the bill wound its way through various amendments in the Assembly and Senate, bringing to the fore Richard Ferrand, a Socialist deputy from Brittany, the bill's rapporteur. Arbitration between senate and assembly versions having failed, Valls used 49-3 again on 16 June to enforce the government's will.

This parliamentary battle was France's main domestic political story in the first half of 2015. It left scars both between the PS and its left-wing allies, which became evident in rival lists for the December 2015 regional elections, and within the PS, which became evident in the January 2017 primary when Valls was defeated. It made Macron's name, then left him free to continue his battle for economic reform 'Putting [the law] into action and continuing the movement, these are my two priorities'.¹³

It is too soon to assess the effects of the *loi Macron* on economic growth or job prospects, though France's high unemployment rate did begin to fall by 2017. Some social effects, though, were immediate. French families now find their supermarket open on a Sunday morning. Most dramatically, cheap intercity bus routes mushroomed. In March 2016, the state authority supervising the new routes (ARAFER) announced that 770,400 passengers had used such routes in the last five months of 2015 – a massive increase over the 110,000 who had used them in the whole of 2014 – and the problem now was inadequate bus

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stations. Naturally, the new coaches were called in French *les autocars Macron*. By 2017, most of the French young must have used, or know a friend who has used, a Macron *autocar*.

This achievement gave Macron a familiar, friendly identity. When he was discussed in the media in the context of Fillon, a racing car enthusiast, Macron was ironically '*le champion des autocars*'. It fed into his presidential campaign; in September 2016, quoting a rise in annual usage by then from 110,000 to four million, he claimed that this 'symbolic reform' broke one of the barriers between '*les insiders et les outsiders*', arguing that such mobility – for jobs, for leisure, for social life or for love – was essential to free whole areas of France from slavery, notably the *banlieu* of Paris.¹⁴ Notions of access and the smashing of barriers became a leitmotiv of Macronism.

The political effects were already visible. In June 2015, a youth group '*Les Jeunes avec Macron*' formed to support his economic reform campaign;¹⁵ sixteen months later one of its co-founders, Sacha Houlié, became one of *En Marche!*'s nine envoys as the Macron candidature was prepared.¹⁶ In France, political summer schools form part of the annual rhythm of politics. In 2015, the day before the opening of the yearly Socialist gathering at La Rochelle (held under the slogan 'Act Together'), the two wings of the party organised rival gatherings. The right wing met nearby at Léognan (Gironde); Macron (not invited to La Rochelle as he was not a party member) was its star turn, as the senior Socialist Gérard Collomb (whose re-election as mayor of Lyon had been a notable PS success the preceding year) publicly commented on his despair at the conservatism of thought of the rival camp of left wingers. On the same day, 27 August 2015, Macron received a standing ovation at the MEDEF (employers) summer school.¹⁷ The seeds were sown for the political realignment of April–June 2017.

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The November 2016 primary

Before then, elections were due in December 2015 for the new twelve French mainland regional assemblies (Hollande's flagship reform of 2014); voting took place shortly after the Bataclan massacre in Paris. The *Front National* advanced to 28 per cent of the vote, well ahead of the centre-right joint lists. As the last major test before the 2017 elections, that made Marine Le Pen's presence in the second round of the presidential vote a near certainty. This prospect galvanised French politicians, as both right and left prepared to fight each other for the role of beating her; the FN had been easily beaten at the second round of the regionals in its two strongest regions, as the PS withdrew its lists to clear the way for the centre-right (see Box 1). It also seemed to mark the end of a centrist challenge; the Bayrou–Borloo idea of 'The Alternative' had disappeared, and almost

everywhere centrist forces had opted for lists of the left or the right, presaging a simple three-way presidential race.

Both France's two big parties chose the innovative method of citizen primaries, open to all electors who turned up on the day, declared their broad support and paid a small fee; this was used for the first time in 2011 by the PS, when Hollande had won the nomination. Both sides hoped this would prove, as it had for the PS, a unifying experience. This time it would not prove so for either.

The *Les Républicains* party planned the move carefully, following a brief chaotic civil war in late 2012 over an effectively tied election for a new leader. It boldly called its primary that 'Of the right and of the centre', though no centrist party accepted the bait. The UDI balloted individual members of its member-parties on whether to participate; they decided it should keep an official distance. So the seven candidates for nomination comprised six leading LR politicians and one face-saving non-LR participant from a tiny satellite religious party.

The contest boiled down to a final choice between two former prime ministers, Alain Juppé (a long-time favourite, explicitly bidding for centrist votes as the route to winning the presidential race) and Francois Fillon (who won the three TV debates in a remarkable late sprint, mobilising two distinct sources of right-wing ideas, religious and economic). Though the UDI was officially not engaged, Lagarde and Hénart had called for support for Juppé, emphasising his humanist values and pro-European views. In retrospect, Fillon's emphatic victory on 27 November 2016 is the point at which Macron became the man most likely to get the chance to face Le Pen in May 2017.

It left Bayrou (and MoDem) without a strategy, as he had made his next move dependent on the outcome of a primary choice between Juppé and Sarkozy. It left the UDI and centre-leaning LR voters unhappy, particularly as Fillon's proposed severe cuts in healthcare provision suddenly became the subject of scrutiny. Despite that, in December Fillon clearly led in the polls. But when his controversial employment of his wife and children on the public payroll was revealed in late January and, after first undertaking to stand down if subject to formal investigation, he then catastrophically refused to fulfil this pledge, Fillon's ratings dropped, never to recover. If he had been a candidate nominated simply by LR, the party could more easily have dumped him. Instead, he insisted on his right to stand as the overwhelming choice of a primary vote involving 4.3 million people.

En Marche!

Macron, meanwhile, had carefully prepared his bid, in stages. In early April 2016 he brought

Part think tank, part a series of mass rallies, EM! held meetings around France to ask what people felt was not working and to discuss their ideas for new solutions. It avoided starting with its own policies or defining an ideological position.

his supporters together as *En Marche!*, with Richard Ferrand (rapporteur for the *loi Macron*) as secretary-general. Although seen from the start as a platform for Macron's presidential hopes, it was deliberately organised so as not to be a political party. Its officers and members could retain any existing party memberships – so Ferrand remained a Socialist deputy, and Macron remained a government minister (until the end of August). Part think tank, part a series of mass rallies, EM! held meetings around France to ask what people felt was not working and to discuss their ideas for new solutions. It avoided starting with its own policies or defining an ideological position. Macron, and EM!, picked up support early from a few Socialist figures, such as the mayor of Lyon (Collomb) and some centrist ones, especially MoDem–UDI MEPs (e.g. Jean Arthuis, J-M Calvada and Sylvie Goulard), but notably little from leading national political figures until the early months of 2017. EM!'s impressive achievement was organising its rallies, addressed at inspiring length by Macron, to which it attracted crowds of thousands all over the country. He finally declared his presidential ambition openly in mid November 2016, drawing attention away from the right's primary. He had built a momentum without a policy programme, with the declared aim of gathering progressives of all political traditions to combat conservatism.

Meanwhile, the PS was facing the dilemma of how to handle a deeply unpopular president, who (so his friends said) had hoped for a shoo-in as candidate for a second term. Early calls for an open primary for the whole left, from Macron to Mélenchon (who had done well in 2012 as a presidential candidate to the left of the PS), were spurned by PS leaders. Mélenchon openly, and Macron effectively, were left free to promote their own cases as runners without being chosen by a party. Then the PS announced, belatedly, it would organise a primary in January 2017, with nominations opening in December, so allowing Hollande to keep his options open until then. Leaving the announcement as late as he possibly could, he decided that withdrawal was preferable to likely humiliating defeat in his own party primary. Typically, Macron held a major rally in Paris on 10 December, grabbing headlines from the opening shots in the Socialist primary; the media debated whether only ten thousand people had gathered to hear him, or was it the fifteen his supporters claimed? Those on the moderate wing of the PS, who wanted to save their party from a lurch to the left and the repudiation of the Hollande presidency's record, had little time to organise.

In late January the primary of what was called *La belle alliance populaire* chose one of the ministers dismissed in August 2014, Benoit Hamon, over Valls, the prime minister who sacked him. The PRG had put their own proposed presidential candidate, Sylvia Pinel, into the primary; she

came sixth, scoring 1.5–2 per cent across most of France,¹⁸ with higher pockets in the rural southwest, Corsica, some overseas bits of France and among French citizens living abroad. A former leading figure in MoDem, Jean-Luc Bennahmias, also chanced his arm, and came seventh. But the outcome hardly mattered by this stage. France's main party of the left since 1981 was being doubly overtaken by two insurgent movements, Mélenchon's and Macron's.

By January the polls were showing Macron as a strong third runner, with support similar to Bayrou's ten years earlier, with a chance (like Bayrou at that stage) of pulling ahead and getting into the final round, which otherwise would be pitching the more conservative wing of the right (Fillon) against the far right. The regular monthly survey of the leading academic poll conducted for Cevipol¹⁹ had first tested Macron's support, in various hypotheses, in September. If Sarkozy were the Conservative champion and Macron not stood, it found that Bayrou, Hollande and Mélenchon would have been vying for third place. But Macron, taking votes across the spectrum, would already have comfortably made third place then with 14 per cent, even competing with Bayrou. Bayrou, on his own could get 12 per cent. By January, before the Fillon scandal broke, Macron, without Bayrou present, had advanced to 19–21 per cent, depending on who the PS candidate was. Bayrou by then was down to a core 5–6 per cent, if he stood. Then Fillon threw away his party's chance of winning and Macron moved into the commanding position in the polls which led to his victory.

There followed Bayrou's decision to ally with Macron, the official presidential election campaign, the formation of a new cross-party government under Macron's choice of Edouard Philippe as prime minister and the two-round parliamentary elections in June when the centrist forces swept the board. These further developments, along with their wider implications for European politics and liberalism in particular, will be covered in a following article, to be published in issue 98 (spring 2018) of the *Journal of Liberal History*.

In his Young Liberal days, Michael Steed was actively involved with French Radicals on the European political youth scene. He taught French politics (and published about French parties) while at the University of Manchester (1965–88), and now lives near Canterbury (with a second home in the French Pyrenees), where he is an honorary lecturer in politics at the University of Kent. He is grateful for useful comments on earlier drafts of this article from the editor of this Journal and from three anonymous reviewers, and also for access to the library resources of Canterbury Christ Church University.

1 At the 2nd round on 28 June 1970, he took 55 per cent in a three-cornered fight against both a Gaullist and a Communist; Nancy has

- remained a pocket of *valoisien* Radical strength to this day.
- 2 Michel Crépeau, *L'avenir en face – le nouveau manifeste du mouvement des radicaux de gauche* (Saint-Armand, October 1980)
 - 3 This regional strength of the old Radical Party, the MRG and now the PRG, is strongly associated with the circulation area of the regional newspaper published in Toulouse, *La Depeche du Midi*, and with the Baylet family who have owned it since the 1920s. Jean Baylet, who died in 1959, played a major part in maintaining an anti-Gaullist centre-left vote in this region, still evident in Mitterrand's regional success there in 1965; his widow Evelyne-Jean Baylet, who died aged 101 in 2014, was the first female president of a departmental council (Tarn-et-Garonne in 1970). Their son, Jean-Michel Baylet, was leader of the PRG from 1996 to 2016, when he made way for Sylvia Pinel, also from Tarn-et-Garonne.
 - 4 J. Barrot and F. Bayrou, *Actualité de la pensée démocrate chrétienne*, Convention de St Malo 19–21 October 1990 (Centre des Démocrates Sociaux).
 - 5 Comparison of the second ballot straight-fight votes between the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections shows that a UMP candidate polled 0.8 less in June than Sarkozy had done in May, whereas a *Nouveau Centre* candidate polled 1.0 more and a *valoisien* Radical 1.5 more (author's calculations). Thus a seat winnable by the left against the UMP by less than about 4 per cent would not fall to the left if the UMP backed a centrist; that critical difference changed the outcome in marginal seats.
 - 6 *Le Figaro*, 6 Nov. 2014.
 - 7 *Le Monde*, 7 May 2014.
 - 8 National Assembly rules make fifteen the minimum size for a group, which gave the PRG a more independent parliamentary platform. Previously, PRG deputies had normally been affiliates of the Socialist group.
 - 9 *Le Monde*, 28 Aug. 2014, p. 17.
 - 10 *Ouest-France*, 2 Sep. 2014.
 - 11 This draconian procedure had been invoked by some Fifth Republic governments (including Rocard's Socialist one). But it had not been used in the nine years before 2015, while neither previous Socialist premiers, Jospin 1997–2002 and Ayrault 2012–14, had used it. Valls was to use it six times, but his manifesto for the Socialist primary in 2017 then called for its abolition!
 - 12 *Le Monde*, 20 Feb. 2015, ('*Un vote de censure qui reliait la droite*') reported that of the UDI deputies, eight wanted to vote for introduction of the *loi Macron*, thirteen were against and nine abstained; faced with the confidence vote they united with the right. Similarly in June 2015, about half the centrists were reported to be ready to vote for the reform, until repulsed by the use of 49-3.
 - 13 *Le Monde*, 7 Aug. 2015.
 - 14 '*Il est urgent de reconcilier les Frances (1 Sept 2016)*', in *Macron par Macron* (Editions de l'aube, 2017), pp. 44–5.
 - 15 *Les Jeunes* were not that young. Several of their founders had been part of the network hoping for the candidature of Dominique Strauss-Kahn in 2012; by March 2016, when LJAM set up a think tank, *La Gauche libre*, the movement claimed 3,000 members, average age 33 (*Le Monde*, 12 Mar. 2016). A year later LJAM had grown to 18,000 members, average age 29, 70 per cent of whom were stated to have no previous political engagement (*Le Point*, 9 Mar. 2017).
 - 16 '*Emmanuel Macron nommé ses "ambassadeurs"*', *Le Monde*, 27 Oct. 2016.
 - 17 '*Macron, star au Mdef, épouvantail au PS*' and '*A la veille de son université d'été, le PS étale ses divisions*', *Le Monde*, 29 Aug. 2015.
 - 18 This was a considerable improvement on the 0.64 per cent vote for the veteran PRG leader J-M Baylet when he stood in the 2011 Socialist primary.
 - 19 Cevipol (*Centre d'études de la vie politique*) surveys are conducted by Ipsos – Sopra Seria, and are comparable with the British Election Study, being based on 15,000–20,000 names drawn from the electoral register, allowing detailed breakdowns and confidence levels far superior to most polls.

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