

LAST CHANCE FOR THE FRENCH LEFT

by **Alain Bihl** (Translated by **Sheila Newman**)

A noted French author presents an analysis of the national Parliamentary elections in France in March 1997.

Even in France most political observers were surprised by the result of the French Parliamentary elections in March 1997. Seen from overseas, it must seem almost incomprehensible. In a situation where only five years ago the Right had secured its biggest parliamentary majority since the beginning of the Fifth Republic (1958), and had confirmed its strength by winning the Presidential election just two years ago, how do you explain the fact that it has just suffered its worst electoral defeat in forty years? And, conversely, how do you explain the situation where the Left, which was completely out in the electoral cold in 1993, managed, against all expectations, to win the May-June [National] elections? What motivated the electorate to go through with this political change? In particular, what role did immigration questions play in this? And what consequences of this electoral shift may we look for in the future?

These political upheavals will seem a little less incomprehensible if we remember that we must go all the way back to 1978 to find an election where the sitting majority was returned. From this date, including the elections of 1981, 1986, 1988 and 1993, none of the parliamentary majorities, Left or Right, was ever returned.

1978 was not a fortuitous date because it was the year that France, under the leadership of Prime Minister Raymond Barre, began, like so many other developed countries, to engage in a program of neo-liberal policies for managing economic crisis. Ever since then, apart from a brief hiatus in 1981-82, during which the new Left majority attempted a short-lived Keynesian comeback, neo-liberal policies have been adopted by each successive French government, both Right and Left. These policies have generated unemployment and insecurity, political despair and populist resentment. They are deeply unpopular and this unpopularity is the source of the political instability which has become entrenched in France, the conspicuous fickleness of an electorate which, unable to find in social struggle the means to fight off the attacks made on it, has constantly alternated between the remedies offered by the Right and the Left. Moreover, the speed of the swinging between the two continues to accelerate.

Jaques Chirac, President of the Republic and leader of the Right, broke his May '95 election promise to 'reduce social disruption', by which he meant a promise to bridge the growing abyss between the minority benefiting from neo-liberal crisis management and the majority who suffered by it. Because of this the voters rejected him. In the month of August 1995,

whilst reducing the upper level of income tax, he raised the main consumption tax by two points, essentially hitting low incomes. The following November his government provoked the biggest wave of strikes the country had known since 1968. The first provocation was a proposal to reform the system for reimbursing medical costs, which will eventually exacerbate inequalities of access. The second was an attempt to raise the age of retirement and to lower the old-age pension.

The pursuit of neo-liberal policies for reducing public expenditure, in the face of election promises to do the opposite, has been the main factor bringing about the downfall of the Right. Chirac himself had been elected for a seven-year term. As President, his office does not depend on his party holding a parliamentary majority. Nevertheless, when he dissolved the National Assembly for an early election in April 1997, everyone clearly understood that this was for the purposes of returning the Right majority, even a smaller one, under the leadership of Prime Minister, Alain Juppé. This would be interpreted as a mandate for the Juppé government to drive such policies even harder, so that France would satisfy the famous ‘convergence criteria’ of the Maastricht Treaty establishing the European Economic Community of the Fifteen.

In other words, behind the apparent incoherence of an electorate persistently swinging from Right to Left, we can read ever more clearly the continuing rejection of neo-liberal politics which, for twenty years, have been promised as a solution to lead the country out of crisis, when in reality they have only worsened the plight of the majority of the population. Of course, there were other reasons for the rejection of the Right by a relative majority of the electorate, even if these were less important, in my opinion, than those which I have just highlighted.

Among them was a growing awareness of the risks to the Republican values of liberty, equality and fraternity posed by xenophobic and racist discourse and attitudes. This discourse, led principally by the extreme Right — notably the National Front — had, in the last few years, increasingly contaminated minds well beyond the circle of that political family alone. This is how we can understand the need experienced by the Right, once returned to power, to intervene on two occasions (end of 1993 and end of 1996) to tighten up the rules of foreign entry and residence in France. Officially these rules were meant to fight an illegal immigration which is more of a fantasy than a reality. But these two legislative reforms were, in fact, based on totally cynical political calculations: by giving undertakings to the extreme right, the parliamentary right hoped to win back some of the electorate.

The result was completely different. Through its incoherence (the law created a new category of foreigners who were both non-legalisable and unexpellable — a kind of ‘official illegal immigrant’) and its inhumanity (it allowed brutal separation of members of the same family), this new legislation provoked a radicalisation of the foreigners’ struggle along with the reinforcing of solidarity towards them among democratic organisations. All this came to a head in 1996 with the occupation of a Parisian church during several months by dozens of African families demanding regularisation of their status. The government finally put an end to the occupation by sending the army into the church. Television footage showing the army

attacking the church door with axes scandalised a large body of public opinion, including the Right, who now understood the excesses and crimes that could result from this demagogic xenophobia to which the government had succumbed.

It is certain that this would also have affected the election results. This is especially so since the Left had undertaken to change the laws and to renew the French tradition of granting nationality to those born on French soil (*'droit de sol'*) and of generosity in the matter of rights to asylum.¹

However, the Left will have to come up with more than this if it wants to establish itself securely in power. For, without underrating the importance of issues related to human rights, the socialist ministers and their allies will be judged essentially on their performance on economic criteria. This means that if the Left fails to break with the neo-liberal policies it used when it was last in government, it too will be ruthlessly brushed aside after a short time (two or three years at the most), just as the Right has been.

This is because the only political force which, for nearly fifteen years now, has regularly profited from the successive electoral losses of the Right and the Left, is of course the National Front. Once again it has proved this by getting nearly 15 per cent of votes, 2.5 per cent more than in the parliamentary elections of 1993. Even more, it is on the way to achieving the goal it set itself about ten years ago: to split the Right so that part of it will have to ally itself with the Front. By maintaining itself in 132 electorates in the second electoral voting rounds,² only once breaking faith with itself by supporting a candidate of the Right, and in managing to get its electorate to remain true to Front candidates even where that could lead to a candidate from the Left being elected, the National Front contributed to the defeat of dozens of candidates from the Right, beginning with the whole of the right-wing bloc. In this way it signalled clearly to the Right that not only would the Right need to take the Front into consideration in the future, but that it would not be able to return to power without the Front.

The message was clearly sent and has been received loud and clear by a few of the personalities on the Right. Thus, the day after the defeat of the Right, in the *Figaro* of June 2, Alain Peyrefitte, member of the Academie Française, former minister for de Gaulle, Pompidou, and Giscard, openly pleaded for an alliance with the National Front. And, in the great house cleaning in the Right that is sure to follow its electoral defeat, we can imagine there will be many who will take this idea up on their own account, to a degree because it is in their interests to do so, but also because of ideological contamination by the National Front's thesis.

For the Left it will be either double or nothing this time. It absolutely must embark upon an alternative to neo-liberalism. There have been many suggestions for the way ahead including: reduction of hours of work without loss of salaries, stimulation of the economy, and control of financial markets. These will only be practicable within a European setting that has broken away from the terms and principles of the Maastricht Treaty. The Left will not be able to succeed without the support of the social movement that rose against Chirac and

Juppé's neo-liberal policies in the series of strikes of November and December 1995.

Notes

1 Translator's note: There are three procedures for acquiring French nationality, and thus legally moving out of the 'foreign' category: naturalisation or reinstatement by decree, declaration and informal procedures. Children born on French soil have usually had automatic access to French citizenship when they turn 18. This was changed in 1993. From 1995, children born in France to citizens of the old French colony of Algeria, who had not resided in France for more than five years, were suddenly presented with the option of applying for citizenship between the ages of 16 and 21, after which there would be no further opportunity. The old system of French nationality automatically upon reaching majority was gone. Similar restrictions came in force for French-born children of other foreign nationals. Therefore 1994 was a year of an exceptionally high number of naturalisations — 126,400. The Left promised to revisit the nationality legislation and since they won government in 1997 they have emphasised the 'Republican' notion of nationality, arguing that socialisation and birthplace mean that those children of foreigners born and educated in France, upon attaining 18 years, should automatically become French, unless they formally object.

As for more generosity in matters of asylum, in response to the scandalous events of the church occupation, the new Jospin government created an amnesty for illegal migrants where they might apply for review of their status. In response, 150,000 applied. The number who will be regularised is still not final; the rest will be expelled or given short-term visas. There was also a promise to revise the 'Debré laws', which had placed an obligation on French hosts to report to the Town Hall and inform the authorities of the departure of foreign guests from countries of high risk of overstay. The Jospin government has only drafted some mild changes to the Debré laws but has drafted, like many of the European Union countries, severe penal sanctions for employers who take on illegal workers. This initiative is based on the premise that the main attraction drawing people to France is work, so that if work is less easy to get, illegal immigrants will be less keen to come.

2 France is divided into 577 *circonscriptions électorales* (electoral districts), reflecting the number of *députés* (delegates) in the National Assembly (the French Lower House). The election is accomplished in two parts, or rounds. To be elected in the first round, an absolute majority of votes (more than 50 per cent) is necessary. If no candidate manages to get such a majority, a second round is organised. Only candidates who obtained at least 12.5 per cent of the votes in their electorate may participate in the second round. To win the second round a relative majority is sufficient.

Back to [Contents Vol. 6 No. 1](#)

Back to [People and Place Home Page](#)