



MACRON'S VICTORY

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He's a cat – you throw him through the window and he manages to fall on his feet.” This is how Alain Minc, an old acquaintance describes the most modern coming of age in modern French politics. Emmanuel Macron, the youngest president of France in over 150 years can now set about reforming France after his recently created party *La République en Marche* won a majority of seats in the legislative elections. The 351 deputies of *En Marche* include a higher proportion of women and professionals who have never stood in an election than ever before.

The level of abstention, above 50% is the highest since 1958. Much of it comes from the extremes of the political spectrum, some of whose leaders, Marine Le Pen for the *Front National* and Jean Luc Mélenchon for *La France Insoumise*, which has (with the Communist Party) 27 deputies in the new assembly, have tried to argue that fewer voters means less legitimacy for the new head of state and his government. Such arguments feed, in Mélenchon's mind the hope that opposition to the reforms, in particular of the labour laws will be opposed in the streets. He may have overlooked that, for the first time since its creation a century ago, the CFDT supplanted the more hardline CGT as France's biggest union by winning the largest share of worker representatives in the private sector, last winter. This has put its leader, Laurent Berger, who believes his union's momentum provides a historic chance to overhaul France's often conflict-ridden labour relations and move it closer to the more collaborative German model, in the spotlight.

The new legislation would mean an unprecedented decentralisation of labour relations to enable companies to react more easily to economic fluctuations, giving employers more freedom to negotiate on working hours, overtimes and wages with their employees rather than comply with sector-based rules. Lay-offs would be eased and damages that judges can impose on employers in case of wrongful decisions would be capped. At the same time self employed people would gain and their social benefits brought more in line with those who work for larger companies and more effort and resources put into training – a sector where state money is often badly misspent.

The *Front National* has seen its vote halve between the presidential and the legislative elections. Its two bastions remain the northern rust belt of France and the

south. It has nine deputies, including its leader, a greater number than ever before but the overall disappointment its militants feel is hard to disguise. Its message of rejection of the European Union fell on stony ground. Were Mr Macron to utterly fail in reforming France, it could see its influence reborn. For now it remains what it has been for more than a generation, a protest movement on the margins of French political life.

The Socialist Party, with 44 deputies has been mauled and will have to reinvent itself. Caught between its many sympathizers – and leaders – who have moved over to Mr Macon’s movement and the insults of Mr Mélenchon, that will be no easy matter. The conservative *Les Républicains* have fared better but their 137 deputies are divided between those who want to work, a la carte so to speak with *En Marche* and those who feel more comfortable hugging Marine Le Pen’s more overtly racist, anti-European and pessimistic vision of the future of France.

Despite his absolute majority in parliament, the new president will not find the going easy. However, his optimism about France’s capacity to reform has clearly struck a cord among electors fed up with the constant litany of decline which so many political leaders, many of whom have lost their seat as deputies have voiced in recent years. He has given the lie to so many commentators, Parisian “intellectuals” whose opinions are courted by French media and whose discourse on the decay of France and the risk of “Islamic invasion” has drowned television shows and radio talks since the millennium. Few of these commentators saw Mr Macron coming and they are reduced to bemoaning the high level of abstention.

The president’s momentum has put him in a much stronger position than his predecessor, elected on a platform of traditional anti capitalist socialism. The two elections have given him a strong popular mandate which the unions will find hard to oppose radically. Voters opposed to his pro-business reforms could have voted for Mélenchon or Le Pen. They chose to abstain or vote for him, maybe out of lassitude and a resignation as to the inevitability of such reforms.

Time alone will tell whether 2017 can be compared with 1945 when De Gaulle rebuilt France’s institutions after the German occupation or 1958 when the same man came to power cut the Gordian knot with Algeria and implemented bold economic reforms. Comparing Emmanuel Macron to Jupiter or Louis XIV is wide off the mark. It is true that the modern Parisian elite has the size and density of a court and that its outer moat is the *Périphérique* ring road but the victory of this rookie politician, however much he may belong to that elite, suggests that the street’s view – the status quo is terrible but must never change, might not last for ever. *Immobilisme* has been the system in recent decades but it is not inscribed in the country’s ADN for ever.