

AFTER THE SECOND ROUND OF THE FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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On the morning after the second round of the French presidential elections, the French papers openly celebrated the “crushing” defeat of Jean-Marie Le Pen of *le Front National* by Jacques Chirac. While this came as a relief to many, Le Pen nevertheless received nearly 20% of the popular vote nationally – an increase of between five and eight hundred thousand votes over the first round two weeks before. In only one *Departement* (Corrèze – in the south-centre of the country where Jacques Chirac keeps a chateau), was Le Pen’s support lower than 10%. Down here in the south-east, a traditional *Front National* stronghold, he polled 30%, and in many communes, more than 40%.

Since (Socialist) Prime Minister Lionel Jospin was knocked out of the race by Le Pen after the first round, political pundits from both sides have offered theories for the rise of the extreme Right. Most of these ‘explanations’ seem to have been more concerned with the country’s international reputation – and the reputations of the political pollsters whose predictions for the first round proved so disastrously wrong – than with understanding what had prompted one in five français and françaises to endorse extremist policies.

Like every other country in recent years, the French have watched while the traditional bases for self-esteem (job security, liveable wages, a decent standard of living and the perpetuation of their culture by the young) dissolve in their hands, while the state seems unable – or unwilling – to take effective action. With less than 20% of the vote in first round, it was never likely that Le Pen would actually be elected, but the fact that one in five were prepared to give him a chance has shown just how ready some are to turn to someone – anyone – who promises to **DO SOMETHING**. And, as always, the easiest thing to do is to blame the ever-present Other (Brussels, North African immigrants, globalisation...) for the country’s woes. If one had ever wondered how Herr Hitler could ever have achieved power through the ballot box, they need wonder no longer.

When one’s self-esteem is built on a weak foundation (of material success, of being White, or male), it is easy to see how the presence of ‘Losers’ constitutes a persistent and frightening reminder of just how tenuous our membership is in the group of ‘Us’ – and how easily we might have been one of ‘Them’. Jung said that what we fear most about ourselves is often pushed into the unconscious from which it is then projected onto The Other and that, by punishing *them*, we can delude ourselves into believing that we have successfully excised this quality from ourselves. Whether it is killing Jews, blaming North Africans, bashing gays, battering women or, the favoured past time of neo-liberals: punishing the poor, we reassure ourselves that we are among life’s winners – and let the Devil take the hindmost. This isn’t politics – it’s exorcism. And it has been known to kill.

Not one to pass up an opportunity, this malaise handed Chirac the strategy he needed to solve his legal problems.

Following the decision of the federal court last year that he cannot be prosecuted for his alleged malfeasance during his previous incarnation as Mayor of Paris while President of the Republic, everyone knew that Chirac *really* needed to win this one. Moreover, after polling just over 20% in the first round (the lowest by a sitting President in living memory), Chirac had good reason to worry. It would not have taken a genius to figure out that the best way to increase his chances in the second round was to run against Le Pen.

It has occurred to more than a few here that this may have been the reason why the dominant theme of Chirac's campaign was "security". Throughout the campaign, he constantly played up the fears and insecurities fanned by Le Pen about rising crime, immigration and the threats to French culture posed by globalisation. As a result, he succeeded in attracting some of the 'soft' Left votes – even at the calculated cost of sending some supporters of the moderate Right over to *le Front National*.

Chirac's gamble evidently paid off: in the second round, the supporters of the decapitated Left held their collective noses and voted for Chirac in the second round just in order to defeat Le Pen. According to estimates in the French press, more than half of his 81% of the vote came from the Left.

Chirac has played a dangerous game and won. If he does nothing to address these problems, he runs the risk that the voters will find Le Pen even more credible in 2007.

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