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The End of Sarkozy

By Jeremy Harding
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France is still on the outskirts of Trumpton, after round one of the centre-right's first open primary to appoint a leader. To take part on Sunday you didn't have to be a member of Les Républicains (formerly the Union pour un mouvement populaire). All you had to do was show the volunteers at the polling station that you were on the electoral register, hand over two euros, sign up to Republican values, and agree on the need for political change ('l'alternance'). Change from one centrist grouping to the other, that's to say. Even dyed-in-the-wool right-wing voters are staring down the barrel of a gun.

At the other end is Marine Le Pen, the upheavlist candidate for the presidential race next year, jubilant in the aftermath of the Leave vote in the UK and Trump's win. It was clear before the British referendum that she would go to round two of the presidentials – the left is out of the race – but after Trump, it would be rash to rule out an FN victory. Whoever emerges from the centre-right primaries to face down Le Pen will be crucial.

There were seven candidates on Sunday. Of the three who mattered, François Fillon, Nicolas Sarkozy's prime minister from 2007 to 2012, was not the one to watch. The real tussle appeared to be between Sarkozy, running on an authoritarian, chauvinist ticket, and the feelgood candidate, Alain Juppé, now in his seventies, a purring cog in the remains of a creaking party machine. Juppé favours civilised values and 'diversity', a code-word whose meaning on the right keeps switching.

For Sarkozy in 2007 it meant more token non-white French in government and the media: a view he later abandoned. For Juppé and his followers it signals a tolerant, non-Islamophobic France, jobs and ‘happiness’ and – even though he’s pledged to shrink the public sector and balance the books – plentiful debt of the kind he’s incurred as mayor of Bordeaux in order to modernise the city. He is nonetheless a reluctant market liberal with plans to shrink the public sector.

Fillon is the genuine article. He promises to cut more taxes and public-sector jobs than Juppé; he is also a stern social conservative with a dislike of gay marriage (he doesn’t plan to undo the legislation) and any deviation from down-the-line Catholic models of family life. He lost the centre-right leadership in 2012 in a wafer-thin defeat, on an internal vote that he disputed: one of the reasons for holding this open primary was to avoid marginal results of the kind that racked the party four years ago; another was to ensure that Sarkozy didn’t snaffle the leadership. Fillon did well in the televised debates and enjoyed an impressive last-minute surge in the polls, but all eyes were on Sarkozy and Juppé.

In my neighbourhood the elderly head up the demographic. Before noon at a nearby town hall in Charente-Maritime, business was brisk, despite some wobbly episodes on the steps. Most of the two thousand inhabitants of Saint-Aigulin are over 45, and of those the majority are over 60 – a statistic reflected in nearby districts sharing the voting station this time – but the average age just before lunch looked more to me like 70.

In Dordogne, in the village of Saint-Aulaye, where the largest tranche of an even smaller population are the over-75s, the staff at the polling station were impressed by turnout. From busier parts of the country news of long queues was coming in. With two hours to go before voting ended, the numbers at national level were already as high as they’d been for the Socialist Party primary in 2011.

The real casualty in yet another ill-predicted move by voters – four million or so in this case – is Sarkozy. His campaign drove him so far into the gloomy identitarian recesses of the right that he might as well have run it from the sleeve of Le Pen’s dressing gown. He was dogged by accusations of financial impropriety in his 2007 electoral campaign, with millions of euros arriving in leather suitcases from Libya. Fillon, with his dry Thatcherite platform, took the alienated vote and now finds himself with a lead of 16 points over Juppé for next Sunday’s runoff. In a remarkable first-round result, it’s all over for Sarkozy.

Florian Philippot, Le Pen’s strategist and comms wizard, described Fillon on Monday as ‘the most ultra-liberal of the lot’, with nothing in common with Le Pen. He couldn’t have said the same of Sarkozy. By borrowing her nativist discourse and serving it up as the leadership candidate of a mainstream party, Sarkozy has prepared the ground for Le Pen’s success in the first round of the presidentials. Happy Juppé may no longer be the figure to hold her off. Today the dour Fillon looks better suited to the task: for reasons that are getting harder to explain, unhappiness is really what the voters in Western democracies are hungering after.