

A hope and an experiment gone badly wrong. France represents one of the Left's great disappointments. The question is why?

# LE FIN

## France Abandons Socialism

Keith Dixon & Daniel Perraud

MAJOR CHANGES ARE now under way on the French political scene. After three years of apparent unity, the Left has broken up once again, with the Communists (the PCF) moving into opposition against a homogeneous Socialist government intent on pursuing 'realistic' policies which have little in common with its initial promises. In every conceivable area of government policy, from the treatment of immigration to the relations with the developing countries, the reorientation has been spectacular. The Socialists who only a few years back were promising France's 3.5 million immigrant population the right to vote in local elections are dealing with the immigration 'problem' through increased controls and repatriation offers. In foreign affairs, traditionally the special preserve of the President under the 5th Republic, despite high expectations raised by Mitterrand's Cancun speech in 1981 and his initial support for Nicaragua, the Socialist President has in fact taken over Gaullist practice lock, stock and barrel, particularly in Africa, whilst abandoning de Gaulle's fundamental hostility to the US. The result has been the tampering in Chad and the Lebanon, and pro-US alignment on the Euromissiles issue.

On the home front, economic priorities have been reversed, with the fight against inflation taking over from the reduction of the unemployment rate as the Government's prime objective. Structural and social reforms have been postponed indefinitely, a wage freeze has been imposed on the public sector, there have been calls for more 'realism' in the working class, and a

far more overtly accommodative attitude towards employers has been adopted. Since the arrival of Fabius in Matignon, and the split between socialists and communists, the themes of 'national unity' and 'modernisation' have become the rallying call of the *mitterrandistes*.

All the indicators of public support, from opinion polls to national elections, show not only that the parties of the Left are increasingly isolated but also that the comeback of the Right is being operated along lines largely influenced by the ideas of the new Right. Nobody now would seem seriously to defend the idea that the Left has even an outsider's chance of winning the legislative elections in 1986. The parties of the Right are now taking their victory so much for granted that their major preoccupation in this respect is whether or not they will accept coexistence with a Socialist President (Mitterrand's term in office does not end until 1988).

The impetus for progressive reform has thus been lost, under parliamentary and extra-parliamentary pressure from the Right. The recent period is exemplary: the Government has been forced to back down on two major issues, the reform of the press and the unification of the school system. In the first case, the attempt to break the monopolistic hold of press baron and ex-nazi, Robert Hersant, was presented successfully as an attack on pluralism. The proposed changes in the school system, mapped out in Savary's Education Bill, met with a barrage of criticism from private school parents' associations and the

Catholic hierarchy, who saw them as undermining religious freedom and individual choice. Thus the financial privileges and unfair recruitment practices of the denominational schools have been maintained after a series of mass demonstrations of protest throughout France.

A full and convincing explanation of the present crisis on the French Left and the concomitant turnabout in government policy cannot however draw solely on the vicissitudes of the last three and a half years of left government. It may be necessary but it is inadequate to describe and denounce the rightward drift of the Socialist government: it is certainly unproductive to attribute this to the inherent vices of social democracy. What is needed is a clearer understanding of the long-term process of social and ideological change which has made this shift not only inevitable, but even desirable for some within the French Socialist movement.

### 1968 revisited

There is general agreement that the French economy and class structure have undergone profound changes in the post-war period: decline in the weight of agriculture within the economy, growth of tertiary activities, emergence of new white-collar strata industries, changes in the composition of the working class as traditional manufacturing industry declined. And these changes were of course reflected in the trade union and political spheres. Thus in the mid-60s the formerly Catholic CFDT emerged to become a major competitor/partner of the CGT, drawing its membership largely from the new intermediate strata of white collar workers, and also from the 'new' working class recently arrived from the countryside. By the late 60s the Socialist Party, founded by Francois Mitterrand and various small Socialist groupings including the once powerful SFIO (*Section Francaise de l'Internationale Ouvriere*), was attempting to give political expression to the aspirations of these new strata.

These changes which modified both the class structures and traditional modes of trade union and political expression found a spectacular echo in the much mythologised events of May 1968. At the time, the PCF although extremely suspicious of the ideology of the student movement nonetheless analysed the May revolt and the general strike which it sparked off as a new phase in the revolutionary struggle which would bring increasingly into play these new social forces of the intermediate strata alongside the working class. This



President Mitterrand.  
Is he a socialist and does he  
believe in socialism?

was to be the anti-monopolist alliance in embryo.

Unfortunately, developments in France over the last fifteen years have not confirmed this somewhat optimistic analysis. With hindsight, what now seems of greater historical significance in the movement which led to de Gaulle's downfall was that it was the first significant political battle of a mass nature since the war to have broken with the traditional 'bipolar' alignment of forces (Right vs Left: labour vs capital). These strata and their student vanguard of 1968 had no clear political objectives apart from drawing attention to their uneasy existence within the conventional framework of French politics. They oscillated throughout the late 60s and early 70s between diverse and contradictory 'host ideologies'. Their first but not final landing-place was the fashionable ultra-leftism of that period, which extended from the populist 'Maoism' of the *Cause du Peuple* to the more severe Trotskyism of groups like *Lutte Ouvriere* or the *Ligue Communiste* whose membership rose dramatically.

While the French communists concentrated their efforts on trying to marginalise these *groupuscules*, considered to be poaching on communist ground, the new Socialist Party entertained ambiguous relations with them. In fact it managed to syphon off quite a number of their activists. Few realised at the time that the ideological developments in these strata, the 'spirit of 1968' (libertarian critique of the state; rejection of the 'superpowers'; individualism and suspicion of both the

leaders and the traditional organisations of the working class) would not disappear

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with the eclipse of the *groupuscules* but would soon find new and unlikely homes.

It is perhaps in this light that the period of the Common Programme of the Left (1972-1977) should be reappraised. The Left although apparently growing in strength was in fact deriving benefit from the *ambiguous* situation created by the May events. Despite its electoral results the Gaullist Right had been severely weakened, and was having to cope with an enemy 'from within' in the persona of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. By the mid 70s the fever had fallen in the new middle strata who were increasingly turning their support towards the traditional Left, and above all to the Socialist Party. This shift of support had contradictory effects. Throughout the 70s the Left undoubtedly benefitted from it, by widening its social base and renovating its ideological arsenal. Thus during this period there was a growing awareness on the Left of the problems raised by the women's movement, the regionalists and the environmentalists. The notion of *autogestion* (self-

management and decentralised local control) was widely debated. However, many of the 68 thinkers who were rapidly promoted to positions of authority in the non-communist Left brought with them their fundamental hostility towards what they considered to be the traditional 'dogmas' of the Left, which in the French context had been so heavily influenced by Marxism.

Alongside these developments within the Left, the Right increasingly came to dominate French intellectual life in the mid/late 70s, with an onslaught on these 'dogmas' one of its central features. The active young rightwing intellectuals of the *Club de l'Horloge* and the *GRECE* embarked on what some of them described as a Gramscian strategy of reconquering cultural and ideological hegemony. Aided by the economic recession and the discredit which had fallen on a post-Keynesian welfare state unable to provide solace in hard times, they developed an individualist, anti-statist and virulently pro-capitalist ideology which was fuelled by disparate strands of extreme right thinking. The positions on which the French Left had built its postwar ethical hegemony (anti-racism, anti-fascism, egalitarianism, rejection of capitalist virtues of efficiency and profit-making) were to be lifted with the combined, if eclectic, help of sociobiology, historical revisionism, and the strident ultra-liberalism of Hayek and Friedman. These new Right efforts to undermine the intellectual dominance of the Left were undoubtedly aided by the parallel attempts of the so-called 'new philosophers' of the late 70s to give respectability to their rabid anti-sovietism by marketing the notions of dissidence and anti-totalitarianism.

#### The fate of the PCF

The major victim of these ideological changes in the 70s was, of course, the PCF. For two reasons, however, the PCF seemed to enjoy a much stronger position during this period than was actually the case. Firstly, although it remained camped on its still substantial areas of dominance in the industrial working class, the strategy of left unity which it developed successfully from the late 60s enabled it to maintain a marginal hold on strata outside the working class, in particular on a substantial body of intellectuals.

Secondly, for reasons relating to modern French history (the resistance, anti-colonial struggles in Vietnam and Algeria, etc) the PCF was still held in respect, and therefore 'protected' by many influential figures within the intelligentsia, even those

who fundamentally disagreed with its policies. The PCF benefitted from the anti-fascist, anti-colonialist consensus upheld by intellectuals like Sartre, de Beauvoir or Max-Pol Fouchet: a consensus in which blatant anti-communism or anti-sovietism were stigmatised, the role played by the PCF during the resistance recognised, and the working class political activism represented by the PCF respected. When, in the late 70s, left unity split irreparably, and the ideology of anti-totalitarianism took over from that of anti-fascism in the intelligentsia, the PCF's objective isolation within French society became clear for all to see.

The spectacular decline of the PCF from the late 70s, which has recently been confirmed in the European elections, must be situated in this context. Alternative explanations which stress the pro-sovietism of the PCF, the inability of its functionaries to understand the changes taking place in French society, or the undemocratic internal organisation of the **Party** may all cast some light on this process, but they do not get to the roots of the problem. The pro-Sovietism of the PCF, for example, is less marked now than it was 15 years ago, despite the turnabout in the 1978-1981 period which led to approval of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and disapproval of Solidarity.

What is striking, however, in this respect, and has undoubtedly undermined communist influence, is that the PCF, after abandoning the Soviet model, has been incapable of replacing this coherent frame of reference with a persuasive critique (be it favourable or unfavourable) of 'actually existing socialism'. The new philosophers and their followers spotted this fatal weakness and have made tremendous political capital out of it. It is now their manichean vision of socialism which informs French public opinion, and not anything that may be said by the PCF.

#### More than just a bad start. . .

By the time the Left arrived in power in May 1981 the PCF, with its invaluable reservoir of working class activism, had been weakened and marginalised. Moreover, the Socialist-Communist coalition had only just been patched together after three years of division and mutual recriminations. The labour movement was disunited and demoralised, and the trade unions (CGT and CFDT) were rapidly losing membership. All this was in stark contrast with previous periods of Left government ('36 and '45) which had been the result of sustained popular struggles.

At the same time, the national and international dimensions of the economic crisis had been minimised by the Left as it heaped blame on the ruling right-wing parties throughout the 70s for France's economic difficulties. This was particularly true of the Socialist Party, which now dominated the Left coalition, and whose economists totally underestimated the objective constraints weighing on the French economy. Their forecasts of an upturn in international economic activity by 1982 which would boost France's reflationary efforts turned out to be pure fantasy. The effects of the crisis on social behaviour and expectations were also overlooked. Thus, for example, growing popular hostility towards the state, and the increasingly emotive demand for 'security' in an apparently insecure world - which the radical Right has since made the most of - were hardly taken into account.

In such conditions, and despite the landslide nature of the Socialist victory of 1981, there was to be no mobilisation of popular support. This in turn encouraged

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the *technocratic, statist tendencies* within the Left government. Notwithstanding its rhetoric, these were already strong within the Socialist Party where an increasing body of high-flying technocrats, often reared in France's elitist *grandes ecoles*, had moved into positions of power. (This was true within the Socialist Party, but even more so of the 'collaborators' and advisors of the various ministries). Such trends were to weigh heavily on the evolution of the Government's policies - particularly after the apparent failure of the economic strategy of 'reflation in one country'.

#### Adapt or resist?

An appraisal of the first year of Left government, and in particular of the turnabout in June 1982, is of crucial importance for interpreting what has happened since. The now orthodox explanation provided by supporters of the abandonment of the reflationary policy (and *de facto* of the Left's programme) is one of the so-called economic realism: a necessary shift from impractical idealism to *real politik*. This is the line which has been systematically defended by the economic commentators

of *he Monde*, for example. The strategy implemented by the Mauroy government in the initial period, which consisted of extensive nationalisations, greater trade union rights, and above all reflation of the economy by pumping in increased purchasing power and reorienting industry towards the reappropriation of the home market, was - so the argument goes - doomed to failure. When unforeseen obstacles loomed at the end of the first year (balance of payments deficit, high inflation, growing unemployment etc) there was no alternative but to abandon the outmoded Marxist dogmatism (by now a familiar theme. . .) which had inspired the initial programme and to *adapt* to the constraints imposed by the open nature of France's economy and a predominantly hostile international environment.

It would be absurd to deny the existence of such constraints: we have suggested, on the contrary, that they had not been sufficiently taken into account before the Left arrived in power. The question was however whether to adapt or to resist, and if there was to be resistance, *how* to resist. This could not have been done without the active mobilisation of popular support around a political project which had at least the same mystique as that being proposed elsewhere by Thatcherism or Reaganism.

The notion of *autogestion*, which figured in both Socialist and Communist programmes before 1981, but was rapidly abandoned afterwards, could well have been the dynamic element in such a project. With its insistence on decentralised, popular control, both in and out of the work place, and its radical critique of Jacobin and statist tendencies on the Left, it commanded support well beyond the traditional social base of the Left. A call for local initiative and involvement as a necessary complement to the Left's parliamentary battles, and as an antidote to right wing resistance, might also have allayed fears of growing bureaucracy and 'too much government'.

It is only in such a context that the Government might have been able to match its ambitious objectives of social transformation with the *means* necessary to attain them - without releasing an anti-statist backlash. As both the PCF and the CERES (the Left tendency in the Socialist Party) were arguing at the time, such measures included the radical expropriation of major owners of nationalisable industries, the construction of an industrial policy directed towards the home market in which the nationalised indus-



Former President De Gaulle.

*Paris, 1968. Where has all the inspiration gone?*

tries would play a key role, stricter controls over the movement of capital, planned trade etc. Such a strategy would doubtless have met with resistance at home and abroad, but it could also have contributed to mobilising people whose expectations had been raised by radical electoral promises from the Left up until 1981. ('Everything is possible' proclaimed a Socialist Party poster in the run-up to the 1981 elections). The feeling of betrayal which was quick to set in and sour relations between the governmental parties and their supporters (and which explains the high level of abstention of Left voters in recent elections) might thus have been avoided.

A much clearer idea of which social strata could and should be counted on in a process of accelerated social change, and which strata were likely to resist would also have been a most valuable asset in this period. The underestimation of political resistance to the Left not only among the major capitalists, but also among other substantial strata of the population (the farmers, the non-salaried middle class etc) had been a common feature of the theoretical analyses of both the PCF and the Socialist Party in the pre-1981 period, intent as they were on developing the idea of a 'broad front'. The practical consequence of this was that the Left was taken



very much unawares as doctors, peasants, lawyers and lorry-owners took to the streets in violent reaction to left wing reforms.

### The rightward drift

Faced with growing resistance at home, serious economic difficulties, multiple pressures from outside (for example, the role of West Germany in European Monetary System negotiations on the devaluation of the franc), but perhaps above all a loss of confidence in the solutions and objectives as initially proposed, the Government began to back down from March 1982. Given the ideological changes discussed earlier, resistance to such a shift had been already largely undermined in the Socialist Party and in the population as a whole. The PCF and a few figures on the Socialist Left had become voices in the wilderness. Rather than attempting a critical reappropriation of anti-statist positions, and thus perhaps stemming the rising tide of neo-liberalism, the Government simply gave in to neo-liberal attacks from the Right, but also from within its own ranks. Since then, the

drift down the slope towards what might be called 'Thatcherism with a human face' has been unavoidable.

As the efforts of the Mauroy government became concentrated on squeezing out inflation by austerity, a new political and economic strategy emerged. This consisted of holding up social reforms (the promised 35 hour week, for example) and spreading the burden of effort away from employers and toward the middle strata (through tax reform and forced saving measures) and on to the working class (by an increase in indirect taxes in the latest budget, for example). With Reaganistic fervour, the Ministers of Finance in the second Mauroy government and the present Fabius administration have been preaching public spending cuts and wage restraint. A government attempt to hold public sector wage increases below inflation gave rise to a one-day strike by public sector employees in October of this year.

Along the same lines, the management boards of the newly nationalised industries have been encouraged, to their relief, to behave as if they were running private firms (the spectre of workers' control having been definitively banished). Economic planning has been pushed back into the cupboard in which Giscard d'Estaing had dumped it in the 70s, and the industrial policy which was to match the ambitious objective of 'reconquering the home market' has never materialised. Austerity, efficiency, modernisation, and competitiveness have become the catch-phrases of a government which came into power three years ago promising to put 'imagination in power'.

Despite the undoubted shift to the right in French public opinion, this Socialist change of heart would seem to be reaping virtually no electoral benefits. On the contrary, the Right has been making the most of broken Socialist promises and the continuingly poor economic performance. Opinion polls now show Mitterrand to be the most unpopular president since the beginning of the 5th Republic, and now that the novelty effect is wearing off Fabius too is slipping down the ratings.

### Dim prospects

However hard the Fabius government may be trying to put across a new image of no-nonsense modernism, lauding the profit motive and the spirit of entrepreneurship, the parties of the Right are continuing to make headway. They have in fact achieved success in the most unlikely areas. Thus on the question of human rights and civil liberties (hardly a strong

point of the French Right while in power), the Left has been pushed on to the defensive. A powerful campaign relayed by influential sectors of the media continues to insinuate that France is on the slippery road towards a totalitarian state: this was a major argument in the recent debate on school reform.

Under de Gaulle, Pompidou and Giscard the traditional parties of the Right had gradually abandoned the terrain of mass politics to the Socialist and Communist opposition. Their electoral defeat in 1981 has galvanised them, transforming their leaders from functionaries into political activists. The neo-Gaullist RPR and more recently the ultra-Right *Front National* have been highly successful in orchestrating, or at least drawing political benefit from, popular manifestations of discontent: everything from disobedience campaigns in the police force to violent street demonstrations by farmers.

The Right, however, is still having some problems in getting its act together before 1986. The present political jostling for the position of front-runner between Chirac, Barre and Giscard d'Estaing certainly weakens the thrust of the Right's attacks on the Government. The recent triumphant re-election of Giscard as a member

of parliament, and the growing popularity of ex-prime minister Raymond Barre in certain right wing circles, are seriously threatening the predominance obtained by Chirac during the first two years of Socialist administration. Moreover, the rise of *the Front National*, which obtained 10.9% of the votes in the European elections this spring, has caused a certain amount of embarrassment and a great deal of cacophony on the Right.

Initially encouraged as a useful ginger group, especially by Chirac's party, the

### there is once again a vacuum on the French Left in which radical politics could flourish

Front is now stealing support and members from the RPR. By accelerating the radicalisation of the Right, it has forced the two traditional parliamentary formations to adjust to the new political landscape, and above all to state their intentions concerning present or future alliances with the neo-fascists. For the time being the rise of Le Pen and behind him a strong current of authoritarian racist opinion is prevent-

ing the RPR and the UDF from deriving maximum political benefit from the growing hegemony of right wing ideas. The presence of Le Pen in any broad right coalition is more than likely to scare off centrist support: his absence reduces the chances of the Right obtaining an overall majority in parliament.

Overall though there's not much to write home about in the present French situation. Even the present mobilisation of part of the trade union movement (the CGT in particular) in the car industry, or recently against the closure of Creusot-Loire, is essentially defensive, and without any clear political perspective. The only consolation, and a paltry one at that, for those who hoped for a socialist transformation of French society when the Socialist-Communist coalition came into power in 1981 is that there is once again a vacuum on the French Left in which radical politics could flourish. The Socialist Party, at present casting out for new allies on the centre-left is unlikely to command the initiative in this field. Perhaps the PCF because of the very dramatic nature of its decline - it is now a matter of change or disappear - could be capable of undertaking the renovation necessary to take up this challenge?

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