



Vive La Gauche

Francois Mitterrand is the first president under the Fifth Republic to have been re-elected. With an impressive 54% of the vote in the second ballot, not only has he improved on his 1981 score, but also succeeded in opening the cracks in the already-shaky edifice of the traditional parliamentary Right.

He has also barred the route to the likely coalition of right and ultra-right forces which would have settled into power had Chirac been victorious. So far, so good.

However, Mitterrand's victory has been an ambiguous one, and the dominant feeling on the French Left when the news broke was one of relief rather than joy. Relief

that the solution to the New Caledonia crisis would not be a colonial war; relief that France's immigrant workers would not become the expiatory victims of organised state racism.

Significantly, the election-night celebrations in Paris, gathering some 40,000 Mitterrand supporters, were organised not at the Bastille, as in 1981, but on the Place de la Republique. The stress was not on storming but on defending. The strategy of a united Left committed to transforming French society has given way to that of a republican front - a hybrid coalition which Mitterrand hopes to build on in order to extend the middle ground. This is the purpose of the

general election this month.

This 'new' strategy seems to have taken over as the official policy of the Socialist Party leadership. There is of course no lack of argument in favour of such a re-ordering of French politics: many of its supporters have pointed to the results of the first ballot of the presidential elections.

Firstly the Left was *defeated* on April 24: the Right, as a whole, obtained 50.9% of the vote (the combined total of Chirac, Barre and Le Pen) whereas the Left obtained only 45.3%. Thus any viable government under Mitterrand - so the argument goes - would have to open out rightwards.

Secondly, the French Communist Party (PCF) - once the dominant partner and most vocal defender of the united Left - continued its downward spiral. With 6.8% of the vote, the Communist candidate, Andre Lajoinie, registered an all-time low. In any case, even if the PCF's score had been higher, the constant and virulent attacks on Mitterrand and the Socialist Party throughout the election campaign would have made any remake of 'Left unity' highly unlikely.

Thirdly, there was the 'earthquake' (which like many earthquakes was quite predictable) of the electoral score obtained by the candidate of the *Front National* (FN), Jean-Marie Le Pen. With 14.4% of the vote, the neo-fascists have not only become the third force in French rightwing politics, on an almost equal footing with the neo-Gaullist RPR and the UDF coalition of technocratic right and centrist groups, but they can now claim to hold the key to any future victory over the Left.

These elections have demonstrated that the emergence of the FN was no flash in the pan. Popular support for Le Pen's movement is growing: it is now a *national* phenomenon, with support seldom dropping below 10% throughout France and topping 20% in nine *departements*; it has tightened its

grip on the towns and areas where it was already strong (it is now the dominant party in Marseille, Nice, Antibes...); it has extended its influence substantially elsewhere (in traditionally rightwing Alsace, but also in what used to be the 'red belt' around Paris).

Even among those who initially hoped to benefit politically from the FN's rise (many on the traditional Right saw the neo-fascists as useful shock-troops against the Socialist government before 1986, and some Socialists were evidently attracted by the idea that the growth of the FN would divide the Right) there is now a feeling that something should be done to encourage a *democratic* reaction to this re-emergence of neanderthal nationalism and virulent racism in France. In this context Mitterrand's appeals for national unity, social peace and a regrouping of democrats seem all the more attractive.

The Left could have played a key role in orienting this anti-fascist reaction towards a positive movement for change within French society. However, another lesson of the presidential elections has been that the vacuum on the Left created by the disintegration of the PCF and the virtual disappearance of the Socialist Left will not be rapidly filled: the failure of Pierre Juquin - the independent communist candidate supported by a constellation of left groups - to break out of electoral marginality illustrates this.

The real danger is that the present regrouping of forces around Mitterrand, bogged down in unimaginative parliamentary alliances with a nebulous centre, will opt for a low-profile conservative defence of the status quo. However, if there is no tangible improvement in the status quo (especially for the many young unemployed or peripheral workers who opted for the neo-fascists) then there is every likelihood that the FN will continue its ominous progress. •
Keith Dixon