

FRANCE VOTES ; EUROPE INTRUDES

Whatever next? Politicians talking about Europe during an election campaign, and not just in a eurosceptic bidding war, but arguing about European policies. In previous French elections, Europe and all its works were castigated by the LePen family, and by sundry hard left candidates, but the mainstream skirted around the inconvenient subject. But what is happening now, in France, is that European questions have become some of the key fault lines in the campaigns of the incumbent, Nicolas Sarkozy and the socialist challenger, Francois Hollande.

At first, the President played defence- the generally successful French Presidency of 2008, Sarkozy and the 'saving' of the euro, illustrated by the joint television interview with the German chancellor, who made clear her support for her ideological soulmate. Then Hollande comes to the attack, calling for the renegotiation of the fiscal pact of the 25 signatory member states, to make it less draconian, more accountable and balanced with measures to promote jobs and growth.

In turn, this led to feigned shock and outrage in the Sarkozy camp- calling into question an agreed Treaty, albeit one that has yet to be ratified. To jaundiced British eyes, the word 'renegotiation' has unhappy associations with the Wilson/Callaghan exercise of 1974 which was little more than an elaborate charade to maintain some semblance of unity in the Labour Party. Nonetheless the perceived affront to 'Brussels' by the challenger led, according to German media, to a diplomatic riposte from the other centre-right governments. Mr Hollande would not be received by conservative heads of EU governments during the campaign.

As his campaign started to tread water, Sarkozy launched two new initiatives both attacking European acquis in other areas, with just as much iconoclasm as Hollande had reserved for a Treaty which has yet to come into force. Most predictably, the first target was Schengen, and the alleged failure of some Schengen member states to ensure the effective policing of common frontiers. Sarkozy proposed in his Villepinte speech in mid-March that the kind of discipline applied to member states that is the hallmark of the new Fiscal Pact should apply to errant member states incapable of controlling immigration flows, including legal and financial sanctions. He also proposed that in the case of sudden immigration surges, controls at national frontiers be reinstated. So far, so banal. A review of Schengen is already underway, and the current agreement allows member states to take exceptional measures, as Sarkozy well knows, having suspended free movement at the Franco-Italian border when he feared an influx of Tunisian migrants in the early days of the Arab Spring.

But in coupling quite legitimate proposals with the threat to withdraw from Schengen in twelve months time unless insufficient progress has been made, Sarkozy upped the stakes, took the initiative from the Front National, gained a small fillip in the polls but opened a wider debate about free movement which at least allowed some of the myths and half-truths to be clarified. As some of his rivals pointed out, restoration of border controls would be an expensive business, and France like other Schengen members has benefited hugely from free movement.

His second proposal was designed not so much to wrong-foot Marine LePen but to outflank the Socialists by appealing to the protectionist strands of left-wing thinking. Europe, he said, should have its own equivalent of the 'Buy American Act', enabling public tendering to be skewed in favour of competing European firms. Again, a legitimate proposal which meets public concerns about the scale of social and environmental dumping. But by accompanying this sketchy idea with an ultimatum to Brussels- do this within a year, or we'll do it just for France- the President-candidate appears to pose a serious threat to the internal market, and hence the very fundamentals of the Union. It is just inconceivable that a system of European preference could be put in place within a year, not least given that most member states are currently strictly opposed.

But as with the debates over Schengen and the Fiscal Pact, the raising of these issues, whatever the motives, however unrealistic or demagogic they may be, there are some collateral advantages. Under the intense scrutiny of the campaign, there is now a serious debate on EU commercial policy, with both candidates and commentators assessing the balance of advantage of the current EU commercial policies, and the risks and prospects for their amendment.

So, for good reasons or bad, Europe has intruded into the French election campaign. It is hard to imagine that it will be absent when the Greeks go to the polls this Spring, or when the Germans and the Italians have their elections next year. The old saying that Europe is too important to be left to technocrats, diplomats and bankers is taking on a new significance.

But here's the question; if elections for the head of state or for national parliaments are to revolve in part about European questions, is it not fitting that the next elections to the European Parliament in 2014 should also be about Europe's policies, activities and record? Surely the next EP elections cannot continue to be just about national issues, because the issues themselves have become European. Is there not now a chance to make the next European elections the first truly European ones?

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