



France turns Right

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Sarkozy must do a Thatcher in France to keep his promises

Mr Nicolas Sarkozy has won, defeating his Left-wing rival, Ms Ségolène Royal, in an election that marks a turning point in French politics. For once, the pre-poll surveys for the French presidential election have proved to be absolutely correct. After the first round, they had all predicted the victory of the conservative candidate with the correct percentage. Soon after the results were announced, Ms Royal gave a Press conference. Speaking in front of thousands of her supporters, she conceded defeat, but appealed to her 17-million electorate to "continue the struggle" - the "French political landscape has been changed for ever", she declared.

In a way, it is true: Both candidates have understood, despite the rigid position of their respective parties, that France has to find new ways if it desires to remain a nation that counts in the 21st century world. The voters were conscious of the critical years ahead, they overwhelmingly participated: Nearly 86 per cent of the 40 million voters cast their votes. The active interest of the electorate has been unbelievable.

Democracy is a strange system. After the results, millions celebrated the victory of Mr Sarkozy, the son of a Hungarian immigrant, while Ms Royal's 'defeat' seemed to deprive millions of others of the hope of a better tomorrow. France was divided into two camps.

Probably sensing the mood of the people, in his acceptance speech, the new President, popularly known as 'Sarko' declared that he aspires to be the President of all the French. The poor are unwilling to believe him - hundreds of cameras followed him to Le Fouquets', one of the most expensive restaurants on the Champs Elysées, where he went with his family and friends for dinner to celebrate his victory.

The next morning, the split between the two Frances was reflected in the editorials of the two main papers. *The Figaro* (pro-Sarkozy) headlined on the full page 'Outstanding Victory' while the pro-Royal *Liberation* just wrote 'Tough' (meaning 'tough' for the nation to have such a President).

The fact remains that the majority of the French have reposed their confidence in Mr Sarkozy to inject a new dynamism into the French economy. In his campaign, he promised to make the French work more for them to create more wealth. Undoubtedly it was a vote for change, a majority of the voters have seen in the new President (despite of the incumbency factor) a leader who will be able to take the nation towards a brighter and more dynamic future.

While both gave the impression that France had a presidential system à l'Américaine during the campaign, with the head of the state possessing very large executive powers, it is not quite the case. The French Constitution, known as the 'Fifth Republic', is a mixed arrangement with a President having some executive powers and a Prime Minister nominated by the President heading a Government responsible to Parliament.

If the President belongs to a party which is in minority in the National Assembly (Lower House), he is compelled to nominate a Prime Minister belonging to the majority party; this 'constitutional accident' is called 'co-habitation' and the process to follow in this case is not clearly defined in the Constitution.

To avoid this unpleasant situation, the presidential mandate was reduced from seven to five years in 2002 and has been made to coincide with the term of the National Assembly for which elections are to be held next month.

For presidential candidates to say, "I will do this, I will do that", is not really correct as it will all depend on the constitution of the next Assembly and, in particular, on the tally of the Centrists lead by François Bayrou during the election.

Mr Sarkozy will thus have to wait for the June election to start implementing the economic reforms he has promised. Only then will he be

able to prove that he is a "Thatcher in pants" or at least emulate his friend, Mr Tony Blair, who was among the first to congratulate him.

Mr Sarkozy often repeated during his campaign that "if they have done it, we too can do it". During the next few months, if he can be a French Blair (barring Iraq), or Merkel, his promises will become the foundation of France's new economic policy.

This election saw the fading of the French Communist Party, an outfit which seems to have no place in a modern dynamic society. It also showed the limits of a purely welfare society in a globalised economy. Even in Beijing the Communists have understood this. Though 'welfare' is not incompatible with healthy economic development, a middle path is necessary.

Will Mr Sarkozy be able to deliver on his electoral promises? It will depend on his capacity to take along the other France, that which voted for Ms Royal.