

France: Former prime minister Jospin resurfaces in the pages of *Le Monde*

Alex Lefebvre
24 February 2003

The former Socialist Party prime minister, Lionel Jospin, has resurfaced in the French press. After his ignominious third-place finish behind the conservative president, Jacques Chirac, and the neo-fascist candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in the first-round presidential elections of April 21, 2002, Jospin withdrew from political life. He made virtually no public statements except vague promises to “express my views ... once the time has come.”

Jospin evidently considers the current crisis of Prime Minister Jean Pierre Raffarin’s government, triggered by its pension-cutting zeal and a wave of plant closings, an opportunity to channel rising popular discontent behind the Socialist Party (PS). The ex-prime minister published a long document, “Being Useful,” in the January 31 issue of *Le Monde*. Although it points out a few rarely expressed, if obvious, truths about the current right-wing government, its main significance is to underscore the political bankruptcy of the reformist Socialist Party and its isolation from the concerns of the working population.

Jospin begins by examining the causes of his defeat. He quickly admits that his government had no serious solutions to fundamental issues confronting French and European society, writing that he was “confronted with fundamental problems to which solutions are necessarily imperfect: globalization, Europe and national identity, individualism and social life, social justice and competitiveness, liberty and security.”

But Jospin does not consider this to be have been a significant factor in his election debacle. Since “everyone faces these problems,” he looks elsewhere for the cause of his defeat.

While saying “he bears some responsibility,” Jospin, in fact, absolves the PS and shifts the blame to the rest of the political spectrum. He first blames the defeat on maneuvers by conservatives and a law-and-order hysteria that nourished what he characterizes as a reactionary

political atmosphere. (Jospin conveniently neglects to mention that his PS government fully participated in churning out law-and-order propaganda.)

Jospin blames former associates—the Communist Party, the Greens, and Jean-Pierre Chevènement of the Citizens’ Movement—for splintering the left vote. He fails, however, to explain why these forces felt politically obliged to distance themselves from his policies, because that would entail acknowledging the right-wing record of his government and the resulting alienation of broad sections of the population.

In the end, he blames the ingratitude of the French people for his downfall, pompously declaring: “I had the right to hope, after honorably governing my country for five years, that my fellow Frenchmen would not place me behind a far-right demagogue.”

Having thus papered over the PS’s role in the alienation of the electorate, Jospin attempts to use Raffarin’s performance to cast the PS in a good light. Jospin notes Raffarin’s dependence on law-and-order hysteria to boost his approval ratings, and says the current prime minister’s inability to formulate a coherent economic line arises from the contradictions between the wishes of the electorate and those of Raffarin’s backers. Jospin asserts that the mounting crisis of the Raffarin government means “the left must be ready to represent an alternative.”

Jospin is clearly concerned that the Raffarin government will turn the people against it more rapidly than “left” circles can resuscitate the PS’s public image. What does Jospin propose the PS do to prevent the total discrediting of the bourgeois political system?

He calls for the unification of the French left along the lines of the right’s jerry-rigged consolidation into Chirac’s UMP. He endorses the current PS leader, François Hollande. He tells the pro-capitalist PS that “reformist and democratic socialism” has decisively won in its struggle against “authoritarian and revolutionary

socialism”—an attempt to quiet certain “left” PS elements, such as Julien Dray and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who have verbally distanced themselves from Hollande and the pro-business Laurent Fabius.

Jospin baldly calls for a return to his government’s policies, declaring, “I don’t think that one should, or that one can, put in question the record of my five years in office.” He defends his unpopular 35-hour workweek legislation, which allowed companies to drastically increase overtime, and notes approvingly that the hard-right interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, has taken up his initiatives for dialog with Corsican officials.

The former prime minister stresses the need for “leadership,” adding that his government consisted of “strong and attractive people.” He omits the fact that PS politicians regularly evoke boos at anti-Raffarin demonstrations.

He concludes by asserting that current events demonstrate the correctness of the PS’s right-wing orientation. He claims the law-and-order position of the PS, which passed measures facilitating police spying and advocated a harsher system of youth prisons, has been vindicated. He admonishes that while the PS can be “a bit more audacious” on social questions, it must remember “that realizable and efficacious policies are required.” He points to the growing tensions with America over Iraq as justifying the French bourgeois left’s traditional plan of strengthening an independent European Union and European defense industry.

Both the right and the left tried to bury Jospin’s statement. The right-wing daily *Le Figaro* dismissed the text as “long, boring, labored,” while half-admitting that Jospin’s predictions of a political disaster for the Raffarin government were nothing new. It ironically wrote, “No propositions other than to wait for the low tide that will destabilize the Raffarin government, which, confronted with economic problems, will ‘impose austerity measures on the French people?’ Is this what PS supporters have been waiting for since the summer, shouting ‘Surprise us, Lionel?’”

A concern that Jospin’s text spelled out something of the current government’s isolation from the working population played a role in Raffarin’s muted reaction. The current prime minister said he thought “nothing or very little” of it. *Le Monde* spoke of the government’s “prudence ... or even pre-arranged silence” on the matter.

To the extent that anyone on the right addressed the substance of Jospin’s claims, it was to argue that the PS’s tradition of verbal conciliation with the working class was

outdated. For Claude Goasguen, vice president of the UMP faction in the National Assembly, Jospin was “isolat[ing] the PS in its archaism.”

The PS’s feuding factions were unanimous in downplaying the event, doubtless with an eye to Jospin’s unpopularity and also to the effect that it could have in the current volatile political environment. Hollande thanked Jospin for his support, but said the former prime minister “should no longer occupy a role in political life.” Some “left” PS politicians targeted by Jospin, like Vincent Peillon, claimed that they “respected his analysis without sharing it.” Fabius simply said, “He did what he thought he had to do.”

Chevènement was the only established political figure to publish a lengthy response to Jospin’s article—a rambling commentary in *Le Monde*, aptly entitled, “Keep moving! There’s nothing to be seen here.” Even Chevènement’s scattershot style could not hide the lack of substantial divergence between his views and those of Jospin. He argued at length and in great statistical detail that Jospin’s electoral loss was, in fact, due to the PS’s mismanagement of alliances with smaller left parties, and not due to Chevènement’s candidacy.

He correctly pointed out that Jospin avoided imposing massive Raffarin-type austerity measures thanks largely to the extraordinarily favorable economic circumstances of the late 1990s. However, for Chevènement this is not proof of the bankruptcy of established politics, but rather an excuse to stimulate “Republican” nationalism—the only “project that can generate enthusiasm.”

Jospin’s letter is a non-event in the privileged circles that rule France, but it is a warning to workers in France and around the world. The official left of the political establishment sees no solution to the current political and economic crisis other than militarism, infringements on democratic rights, nationalism, economic austerity, and behind-the-scenes maneuvering to stifle public debate.



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