Presidential election contest in France: Panic grips the Socialist Party

Peter Schwarz in Paris
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On the evening of March 12, Ségolène Royal, the presidential candidate of the French Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste—PS), spoke in the Japy sports hall in the 11th district of Paris to artists, scientists and intellectuals supporting her candidacy.

Royal read off clichés from her prepared manuscript in a monotonous tone. One had the impression that every word had been carefully chosen to appeal to her audience. Nothing she said gave even a hint of being sincerely believed or felt.

One should not overuse the phrase "the style is the man," or in this case the woman—particularly in the field of politics. There are serious-minded politicians who are bad speakers, and vice versa. But in the case of Royal, there is an obvious connection between her monotonous delivery and the content of her politics.

She had begun her election campaign as a "moderniser" in the manner of Tony Blair, ditching past social reform concepts along the way as she sought to position herself even further to the right than her main rival, Nicolas Sarkozy, the candidate of the governing Gaullist party, the UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire). When this strategy encountered opposition, with Royal plummeting in opinion polls, she changed course, seeking to cultivate a more socially friendly image and develop a clearer demarcation between left and right.

At Monday's meeting, she announced that she stood for an alternative social model to that espoused by Sarkozy, and went on to speak of the incompatibility of economic liberalism and social policy. Finally, she brought the "elephants" of the Socialist Party on board—i.e., those leading veteran PS politicians from whom she had previously deliberately tried to distance herself.

The twists and turns have exposed Royal as an unrestrained opportunist, who says whatever seems opportune and does what the powerful and wealthy forces in the background tell her to do.

Under conditions where many voters are vehemently opposed to Nicolas Sarkozy, a right-wing provocateur, a man no one reckoned would be able to capitalise on Royal's decline, François Bayrou, the head of the bourgeois liberal Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF), has climbed rapidly in the polls and is now narrowly trailing the two front-runners, Sarkozy and Royal.

According to recent polls, Bayrou would win 23.5 percent in the first round of the election, with Royal at 25.5 percent and Sarkozy at 27 percent. Bearing in mind the broad margin of error in poll estimates, it appears quite possible that Bayrou could make it to the second ballot, where he would have a real chance of victory, with many voters of the third-placed candidate—whether it be Royal or Sarkozy—voting for him.

The UDF was founded in 1978 by the French president at the time, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, and is traditionally aligned to the conservative bourgeois camp. From 1993 to 1997, Bayrou was education secretary under prime ministers Edouard Balladur and Alain Juppé. When Jacques Chirac sought to gather all of the country's conservative forces in a single party in 2002—today's UMP—Bayrou and a section of his party stayed outside and maintained the UDF as an independent organisation.

Now, Bayrou presents himself as someone who stands above the quarrels of the other parties and is capable of bringing together the right and left. He told a press conference last week that his success in the polls meant that "something is developing": "It is a message for the French people saying: we are ready to turn over a new leaf. We have had enough of your bickering and non-stop wars! We want the people to stick together."

Bayrou has been able strike a chord with voters tired of the squabbling between parties, whose verbal disputes are inversely proportional to their lack of any real political differences. In terms of content, there is little to distinguish the programmes of Royal and Sarkozy from one another.

Poll results accord to Bayrou the same level of competence as to Royal and Sarkozy, but Bayrou is regarded as considerably "more honest" by the largest percentage of those asked. Thirty-eight percent consider Bayrou as the most honest candidate, with his two opponents lagging behind with 26 percent respectively.

France's radical left parties have played their own role in contributing to Bayrou's momentary success. Five years ago, more than 10 percent of the electorate were prepared to vote for candidates of the radical left as a supposed alternative. But these organisations failed to respond and refrained from

showing any way forward. In the second round of voting five years ago, Olivier Besancenot, the candidate of the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR—Ligue communiste révolutionnaire), called for support for Chirac, while Arlette Laguiller, the head of Workers Struggle (LO—Lutte ouvrière), declared that her party was much too small and insignificant to be able to influence political developments.

In any event, Bayrou's poll ratings remain extremely unstable. Like Sarkozy and Royal, he is a veteran of the ruling establishment and has essentially nothing new to offer. His advantage at the moment consists in the fact that he is relatively unknown and even more colourless than Royal. On this basis, he can pose as the candidate of political reconciliation, something many voters from the middle class and academic layers are seeking. In a society so wrought by social conflict, however, such yearnings are without foundation and will at some point violently collide with social reality.

Nevertheless, Bayrou's successes in the polls have been enough to create panic in the Socialist Party. Traditional socialist voters from the fields of academia and education in particular have switched to the UDF candidate. Now, the party leadership fears it will fail to make the second round—as was the case in 2002. Then-Socialist Party candidate Lionel Jospin suffered defeat at the hands of the National Front's Jean Marie Le Pen.

The meeting on Monday evening was aimed to a large extent at restoring Royal's fortunes amongst intellectuals. She had been carefully prepared. Attendance was limited to 1,000 invited guests as well as selected press representatives. It required a great deal of patience and persuasion on the part of the author of this article to convince event organisers to allow him into the hall.

The chairs were aligned in a circle around the speakers' podium: white at the front for the prominent and famous; further back, brown chairs for the less well known. Party youth were positioned on the balcony to lift the spirits with rhythmic chants of "Ségolène Présidente."

The response was limited, however. Only a few famous faces from French film and television turned up, and eventually Royal took her place between the actresses Jeanne Moreau and Emmanuelle Béart. A few other less well-known actors and television personalities completed the group—and that was it.

Attending from the world of science was the mathematician Michel Broué, son of Pierre Broué, the historian and biographer of Trotsky. For a quarter of an hour, he ranted against Sarkozy, and then for another 15 minutes against Bayrou. Finally, for a few seconds, he praised Ségolène Royal, evidently finding little positive to say about his favoured candidate.

In a one rather unfortunate contribution, the psychologist Gérard Miller praised the feminine character of the candidate, who unlike other politicians was not a "phallic woman."

Royal placed the promotion of education, culture and research at the heart of her one-hour speech. While generously making grandiose promises, she remained remarkably vague and nebulous when it came to detail. She mentioned no figures and failed to address the attacks on education carried out in the 1990s by Socialist Party-led governments, when she served as a minister.

The mood only changed when Royal criticised the nationalist outbursts made by her rival Sarkozy, who had recently called for the formation of a ministry for immigration and national identity. Royal described the proposal as an "intolerable amalgam" of immigration and national identity.

She then proceeded, however, to promote her own variety of nationalism and national identity: "When it comes to me, national identity will neither lose its meaning nor disappear as a consequence of globalisation." She then presented France as a role model for the world. Her only disagreement with Sarkozy was that the national identity of citizens should not be defined by their land of origin, but by "where they want to go together."

She proclaimed that the nation does not differentiate "between white, black or yellow, nor between Catholics, atheists, Jews or Muslims. We are all citizens of the French Republic with the same rights and obligations." But in the next sentence, she insisted that immigrants have to "respect our rules" before being granted equal rights and opportunities.

The entire meeting had an air of detachment and surreality. The standing ovations at the beginning and end appeared thoroughly staged and hollow. Social reality—high levels of unemployment, poverty and rebellions in the suburbs, huge job cuts at Airbus and other companies—found no way into this meeting.

It was a gathering of people who feel threatened by social reality and are seeking to close their eyes to what is going on. These are the layers who are still prepared to support Ségolène Royal. Among broad layers of the population, Madame Royal is a discredited force and has been written off.