

French presidential election

Bayrou poses as alternative to Sarkozy

Peter Schwarz in Paris
21 April 2007

There is a tradition in France of obsolete petty bourgeois politicians presenting themselves as people's tribunes and striving for power on the back of the apparatus of the old workers' organisations. Prior to the Second World War, this was the role played by the Radical Party, which, despite its name, was deeply conservative and hostile to worker's interests.

In 1936, the Radicals in alliance with the Social Democrats formed a Popular Front government and, with the support of the Stalinist French Communist Party, suppressed a powerful general strike and saved the bourgeois order. Thus, one of the last opportunities was lost to stop the fatal shift to the right in Europe that would finally lead to the Second World War. Two years later, Edouard Daladier, the leader of the Radicals, signed the Munich Treaty, which gave Hitler free rein to invade Czechoslovakia, and banned the French Communist Party.

Today, François Bayrou, the presidential candidate of the right-wing, neo-liberal Union for French Democracy (*Union pour la Démocratie Française*, UDF), is attempting to tread in the footsteps of the Radicals. He is using the political bankruptcy of the official "left" parties to pose as the only candidate who can stop Nicolas Sarkozy. Bayrou's entire election campaign is based on this premise. For the broad social layers who fear and despise the candidate of the Gaullist Union for a Popular Movement (*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*, UMP), Bayrou poses as a saviour who can deliver them from Sarkozy. For the French ruling elite, he poses as a man who—unlike Sarkozy—can defend and advance their interests without risking a social explosion.

Bayrou's campaign is concentrated on these issues. Everything else is unctuous clichés, hollow promises and non-committal phrases. His central election slogan, "With all our strength for France," is typical in this respect. It can mean anything to anybody.

Bayrou is the 55-year-old son of a small farmer from the Pyrenees, where he still lives. He is a grammar school teacher in classical literature and a practicing Catholic. At the last parliamentary election, his UDF party won just 4.8 percent of the vote and controls 29 seats in the National Assembly—thanks to a deal it struck with Sarkozy's UMP. Bayrou does not even have the support of his entire party. Prominent members—such as the UDF founder Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Education Secretary Gilles de Robien and the former president of the European parliament, Simone Veil—support Sarkozy's candidacy.

Bayrou held the post of minister for education between 1993 and 1997. During this period, he managed to provoke a million French citizens into mobilising against his plans to finance private and religious schools with public funds. This does not prevent him from posing today as an advocate of teacher's interests and a defender of

the secular state.

This crafty and adaptable politician now poses as the candidate who can "reconcile" France, overcome the divisions between right and left, provide "hope" and lead his country to a better future. He has castigated established right-wing and left-wing politicians as "sectarians," because they oppose collaborating with one another and are only interested in reestablishing "their fortresses and castles so everything remains as it was." It was necessary to strip them of their "power and send them back to their studies," he thundered.

Bayrou held his final election rally on Wednesday evening (April 18) in the sports hall at Paris-Bercy. The main purpose of the meeting was to provide proof that Bayrou could fill a hall with 17,000 seats and has sufficient support to beat Sarkozy in the second round. Public opinion analysts assume that in the first round of voting, many undecided voters will vote for the candidate they believe has the best chance of beating Sarkozy.

The meeting in Bercy was carefully orchestrated, using state-of-the-art video techniques and intolerably loud music. The candidate appeared one hour late and, only visible on large video screens, crossed the room shaking hands before planting himself on a huge stage, surrounded by two loud choruses of supporters, who animated the audience with "the wave" in the manner of a football audience.

The stage was coloured in orange, as were the T-shirts of the UDF supporters. The party has learned its lesson from Belgrade, Kiev and Tiflis, and Bayrou expressly referred to the Western-supported "revolutions" in those cities. Whoever seeks to defend order and private property by means of "revolution" today drapes himself in orange. Bayrou also recycled the slogan "We are the people," which was popular during the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The orange T-shirts read "We are Bayrou."

The audience in Bercy was overwhelmingly white, and it was necessary to scour the crowd in the sports hall to find anyone with an immigrant background. And although the meeting took place in Paris, it was evident that a large proportion of the audience was of rural origin. This is Bayrou's real clientele—the rural middle class, which has suffered from the effects of globalisation. It is to them that Bayrou's election programme is chiefly addressed.

Leon Trotsky once described the Radicals as "the party with whose aid the big bourgeoisie preserves the hopes of the petty bourgeoisie in a progressive and peaceful improvement of its situation." This description is entirely applicable to Bayrou. A large part of his speech was dedicated to small and medium-sized businesses, with Bayrou promising an increase in public contracts, lower taxes, less bureaucracy and the right to hold two jobs free from tax and social security contributions.

Bayrou's election programme evokes the longing for a romanticised

past, when France was the “Grande Nation,” the world was predictable and social tensions were bearable. In large parts it reads like a European Christian-Democratic or social-democratic programme from the 1960s. It promises a greater role for social partnership, more finance for research and education, better public services in deprived areas and the countryside, environmental protection, the construction of social housing, increases to minimum pensions, more democracy and many other things.

The invoking of an idealised past is a general characteristic of the present election campaign, taken up by all the candidates. The realities of the twenty-first century—the impact of globalisation, foreign policy, the Iraq war—barely make an appearance and have largely been filtered out. Three candidates—Philippe de Villiers of the Movement for France (*Mouvement Pour la France*), Frédéric Nihous of the Hunter’s Party (*Chasse-Pêche-Nature-Traditions*) and Gérard Schivardi of the Worker’s Party (*Parti des travailleurs*, PT)—have all made the preservation of rural life (*ruralité*) the heart of their campaign.

When following the election campaign from inside the country, one feels like he is on a different planet. Wishful thinking and an evasion of social reality largely dominate the campaigns. This serves a political purpose. The propagation of illusions is aimed at winning voters while blinding them as to what is to come.

Bayrou’s social promises will be quickly relegated to the waste bin should he make it to the Elysée palace—which is not very likely. Central to his programme is the trimming of the state budget, which excludes any new expenditure for social purposes. Bayrou also vehemently defends the neo-liberal economic policy of the European Union. He describes the rejection of the European constitution by the French electorate as a misunderstanding based on incomprehensible formulations in the text of the constitution.

Behind the façade of social democracy, justice and solidarity decorating his election programme lurks a right-wing, authoritarian stance. In Bercy, he described himself as left-wing when it comes to “equal opportunity and rights” and as right-wing over issues that required “hardness and severity.” He called for the more rapid prosecution of young offenders, stressed that education must be based on standards rather than laxity and favoured the building of a second French aircraft carrier. He endorses the strict control of immigration and rejects any general legalisation of immigrants lacking proper residency papers.

Like his predecessors in the Radical Party, Bayrou will not hesitate to proceed with brutality against any social movement that challenges the existing capitalist system. His differences with Sarkozy are of a purely tactical nature. Both men unreservedly defend the interests of big business.

That this right-wing provincial politician who lacks any real support can pose as an answer to Sarkozy is due to the political bankruptcy of the social democrats and Stalinists. The Socialist Party largely discredited itself through the policies carried in the era of François Mitterrand and Lionel Jospin, while the current Socialist Party presidential candidate Ségolène Royal has shifted even further to the right. The Communist Party, which was the most influential French party after the war, has trailed behind the Socialist Party for the past 35 years and has been reduced to an ineffective rump. Its candidate Marie George Buffet will be lucky to pick up 2 percent of the vote.

In the meantime, as Bayrou proudly proclaimed in Bercy, three prominent SP members—Michel Rocard, Bernard Kouchner and Claude Allègre—have switched their allegiances to his camp.

Rocard, a former Socialist Party prime minister, met Bayrou for

lunch last Sunday. Shortly before, he had proposed an alliance of the Socialist Party and the UDF prior to the first ballot—a move that in effect amounts to supporting Bayrou. Since then, Rocard has denounced opponents of such an alliance as accomplices of Sarkozy. “I accuse the guardians of socialist dogma, who regard any alliance other than with the Communists to be impure, of being effective allies of Sarkozy,” he said.

France’s radical left parties have also played a considerable part in strengthening Bayrou. They persistently refuse to call for a break with the Socialist Party and the building of an independent political movement of the working class. Instead, they spread the illusion that it is possible to persuade Royal to carry out different policies through grass-roots pressure.

The representatives of the French ruling class have been very clear about the role of these parties for a long time. The media treat them with the utmost civility. They know that they are necessary as a means of letting off steam and represent no danger to the existing system. The well-known journalist Alain Duhamel, a supporter of Bayrou, summed this up recently in the daily newspaper *Libération*.

Referring to the six candidates standing to the left of the Socialist Party (Arlette Laguiller of *Lutte Ouvrière*, Olivier Besancenot of the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* (LCR), Schivardi of the PT, Marie-George Buffet of the Communist Party, Dominique Voynet of the Greens, and anti-globalist José Bové), Duhamel writes: “All six restrict themselves to a language that is one more of protest than revolution. Some still sing the ‘Internationale’ and wave red flags, but there is no danger of them giving nightmares to the lords of the 40 biggest corporations.... They put away their ideological nostrums and concentrate their efforts on social goals, which do not presuppose a break with capitalism. They debate in all seriousness about the desirable level for the minimum wage (net, not gross, as they point out), in the manner of the Socialist Party in 1980. In their heart of hearts they remain faithful to their old religion. But in the immediate, their only ambition is to serve as social levers that dream of pressuring Ségolène Royal to make a few additional small steps. They are moderated by their modesty.”



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