

British ruling elite regard Macron victory in France as a “mixed blessing”

Julie Hyland
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The result of the first round of the French elections has generally been welcomed by the political establishment and the official media in Britain as the best outcome.

Under conditions in which it was clear Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front would get through to the second round on May 7, it was widely hoped that Emmanuel Macron (En Marche!) would be her contender. As a former Rothschild banker, committed to neo-liberalism, austerity and smashing up workers' rights, Britain's ruling elite and its media mouthpieces welcome Macron as one of their own.

Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May gave her implicit endorsement when she met Macron in London in February. George Freeman, chairman of May's policy unit and a close friend of Macron, has described the front-runner as the “French John F. Kennedy.” Former Conservative Chancellor George Osborne tweeted, “Congratulations to my friend @EmmanuelMacron. Proof you can win from the centre. At last, the chance for the leadership that France needs.”

Even though Le Pen's policies—especially as regards the European Union and anti-immigrant xenophobia—are closer to the ruling Conservative government, the NF's right populism and the possibility of her provoking a backlash among workers is regarded as too risky by London. In addition, Le Pen is seen as pro-Russian and someone that could weaken NATO's war mongering against Moscow. While the Conservative government is committed to a “hard Brexit,” it hopes to position itself as the foremost ally of the United States within Europe in the drive against Russia.

Following the result, the *Financial Times* editorialised, “Europe has breathed a collective sigh of relief... The French electorate is now faced with a stark choice: between preserving the liberal world order and France's place in it, or voting to tear it up—as Ms Le Pen would have her compatriots do.”

Overwhelmingly, however, the French elections are viewed through the narrow national prism of their potential use value for negotiations concerning Britain's exit from the EU and their impact on the snap general election called by May for June 8. And here, a Macron victory in France just one month before the UK goes to the polls is seen as a mixed blessing.

Prior to last June's referendum on EU membership in the UK, Macron had said a Leave vote would mean the UK becoming “a trading post and arbitration place at Europe's border.”

He subsequently described Brexit as a “crime” and has argued for a “very firm message and timetable” on its consequences. “In the interests of the EU, we can't leave any margin of ambiguity or let too much time go by,” he said. “You're either in or you're out.”

Macron ran as the most pro-EU of all the candidates in France, and has said he is committed to reviving the Franco-German engine. His victory in the first stage has been welcomed enthusiastically in Berlin, and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker broke with protocol to congratulate Macron and endorse him in the second round.

His alliance with Berlin is regarded as worrying by the British ruling elite. Macron has described the “French-German axis” as the “core of the [EU] reactor” and the “pre-requisite for any progress.” He has pledged to “restore the credibility of France in the eyes of Germany” by undertaking far-reaching labour and welfare reforms and has spoken in favour of a “multi-speed Europe.”

Making overtures to Berlin nevertheless come with a price tag. Macron has described the euro as a “sort of weak Deutschmark,” called for Germany to grant Paris greater monetary and fiscal laxity and has voiced support for a “Europe of sovereignty.”

For some, such as François Godement writing for the European Council on Foreign Relations, “A victory by

Macron would be a giant step forward for the deepening of the European core — and in fact a direct challenge to German leaders to make good on the federalist and integrative aspirations that they sometimes exhibit.”

Calculating that Macron will need allies in standing up to Germany, sections of the media speculate he will prove more amenable to British demands. Writing in the *Times*, Oliver Wright noted that Macron’s chief policy adviser, Jean Pisani-Ferry, was the lead author of a report proposing a “continental partnership” between the EU and the UK. The report proposed that London “be allowed to take back control of labour mobility while continuing to participate in most aspects of the single market”—a policy in line with May’s preferred option.

Others have expressed hope that Macron’s hardline stance on Brexit is purely for domestic consumption and that, if he defeats Le Pen convincingly, he will take a softer line.

James Blitz, *Financial Times*, reasoned that this was possible given, “France wants to retain close diplomatic and security ties with the British and Mr Macron is unlikely to want to change this.” Even so, his election “could make matters tougher” for the UK.

Sky News argued a Macron victory would mean the EU could afford to be more generous to UK demands as “there’d be less need for the EU to be seen to be hard on Britain to deter others from leaving the club too.”

Matthew Elliott, from the Legatum Institute think tank allied to the private-investment firm, and a pro-Brexit campaigner, opined that a Macron victory will create “greater political stability, making the Brexit negotiations less complex.”

But for the hard line Conservative *Telegraph* newspaper, Macron is “bad for Brexit and Theresa May” as his opposition to granting a “tailor-made approach” to the UK, “is an explicit rejection of Mrs May’s idea that Britain should leave the EU, but remain a key part of Europe.”

The Tory *Spectator* magazine asked, “The best argument thus far adduced for Macron is that he is not Marine Le Pen, but is this enough?” Writing before the conclusion of the first round, Jonathan Miller complained that Macron’s “superficial moderation conceals an impossible project.” His manifesto resembles a “box of chocolates from one of those upscale confiseries on the Rue Jacob: full of soft centres.” Pledges to “fix” the education and health system and support the police went hand in glove with promises to hand out “billions in new benefits and tax cuts to the young, the old and everyone in

between. How he would pay for it is unclear.”

The right-wing media are especially concerned that Macron will be unable to enforce his agenda under conditions of widespread political alienation and deep hostility to the ruling elite. They anticipate that, even if he wins the second round, he will receive nothing like the 82 percent mandate secured by Jacques Chirac in the 2002 run-off against Le Pen’s father, Jean-Marie. Several forecast that he will perform poorly in June’s legislative elections, making him a lame duck president.

It is a measure of the right-wing character of the upper middle class, “liberal” cheer leaders for the EU that they are the biggest champions of Macron. Writing in the *Guardian* before the election, Martin Kettle argued that a “Macron victory would be much the best outcome among the available choices, not just for France but for the EU. And that means, though Theresa May will be loth to admit it, a Macron win would ultimately be good for Britain too.”

While “A Macron presidency is unlikely to be robust and strong. Many of his reforms will be opposed,” Kettle wrote, but his victory would “be a harbinger... for the importance of future-focused centrist politics, economic and social reform, and international cooperation.”

Kettle expressed his frustration that “there is a large Macron-shaped hole in the centre of British party politics,” which Labour and the Liberal Democrats, under their current leadership, were unable to fill. But “somehow, some time, someone will have to fill it.”

Writing in the *Independent*, former Labour MP Denis MacShane, complained President Trump’s statement to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, that he would “prefer to start on a US-EU free trade deal,” meant all claims that a “Brexit Britain would get preferential treatment in Washington have been deleted...”

Now, if May could “temper her language” and “Labour find words on Europe which make sense,” there was a chance that the Conservative leader, having won the general election, “could forge a defence and security relationship with Macron and put Britain back into play as a European power.”



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