

Round-table: The weakening of the West?

The political situation in France in the context of the situation in Europe and in the USA

Firstly, I would like to thank Joao Carlos Espada and the team of the Political Forum for their invitation. It is an honour to be invited to debate in such company and to try and make sense of where we are heading, all of us coming from different countries of the West.

Ten years ago, I was invited to the Political Forum for the first time, and I gave a rather impassioned pro-European paper on “The Future of the European Constitution in view of the Results of the French Presidential Elections of May 2007” (Nicolas Sarkozy had just been elected). Most of the members of the panel were open Eurosceptics and they welcomed my speech with amused graciousness. Ten years later, in the midst of another French Presidential election, I come to you, maybe not wiser, but certainly older, and as interested as ever to make sense of the political situation in France in the context of the political situation in Europe and in the USA. In the last ten years, there has been no time to take a step back, to absorb what has been happening, from the global financial crisis to the long-term consequences of what happened after 9/11. The political forum is the moment of the year when we can all take a pause and reflect, this year, on what it means to defend “the western tradition of liberty under the law”.

The question for this round-table is whether or not we can consider that a weakening of the West is happening. I would like to modify the question and ask: what is really weakening? Is it the belief in liberty under the law? Or is it something else? I will address this predicament with the three following ideas: firstly, the open disunity of the West concerning what we stand for; secondly, our common failure to defend much more firmly the values of freedom under the law and, thirdly, whether or not the French Presidential and Legislative elections can help us to see if new ways of thinking politics are possible.

1. The Open disunity of the West

The vote in favour of a British exit a year ago, along with Donald Trump’s election last November, has had the effect of making eminently clear, first, that the European Union had reached a dead-end and is incapable of convincing most of the peoples of Europe of its idealistic theoretical project and second, that an isolationist USA, focusing on America first, affects us in Europe and leaves a void difficult to replace for the western block.

This was exposed rather plainly, a month ago, at the NATO summit in Brussels, when Donald Trump decided to make clear that some countries (essentially Germany and France) were not paying their due share of the NATO bill. The look of stunned amazement on some of the leaders’ faces, at such an open display of crudeness, showed that all was not well in the “Western” family. Diplomatically speaking, such an opinion should have been discussed behind closed doors, however much Trump may be accurate about wanting NATO countries to contribute their share. Trump’s refusal to do things the traditional way, being openly brash, has been a rather unpleasant awakening and shows that what we take for granted, essentially the unity of the West, can be all too easily shaken. Open disunity displayed to the world, over

what are essentially financial contributions to our own common defence, can lead us to miss the much greater foundations which have linked us. Like in a family, undergoing a divorce (with Brexit), at the same time as the mid-life crisis of the elder father (with Donald Trump), what is happening has got the potential of making us lose sight of what has made us a family in the first place: a respect for the ideas of the Enlightenment, themselves heavily inspired by those of 17th century revolutionary Englishmen, societies governed by the rule of law, pluralism, equality between men and women and, maybe more than anything, a certain type of civility allowing us to live together in a liberal way.

What Brexit and the election of Donald Trump have made impossible to ignore is that our common core is cracking under the strain of globalization and the forces of anti-democracy. Disunity of the West, and a certain form of complacency for what we have, are certainly weakening us. The central problem with globalization is that it has destroyed direct-lines of accountability. And it was accountability which generated trust. Nowadays, if one takes the single example of France, Emmanuel Macron's responsibility as a President is diluted: regarding the climate question, he may want to change things, he may say so very clearly and in quite good English, but he is powerless to find a solution by himself, let alone when the USA has decided to back out of the Paris Climate agreement. Macron's responsibility is divided between his own desires, those of the EU, that he must consider, along with all the relevant world organizations concerning such a question. In a globalised setting, power is about compromise and power-sharing. Essentially, no one is fully directly accountable anymore as power has been watered down, but politicians like Emmanuel Macron are the ones who will be held responsible when the time comes to be reelected. Therefore, either politicians agree to recognize that they are much less powerful than before or perhaps the electorate should expect less from their politicians.

Nevertheless, what Brexit has shown is that sovereignty does matter, because the global dispersing of power concerning the authority linking people and government is emasculating our national politics. For democracies to work, responsibility and accountability have got to have a direct repository in the politicians who have been elected by the people, if not there is no democracy. Essentially, this is what Brexit was about – of course, immigration and the economic crisis were part of that package – it was about giving a massive metaphorical kick to the self-satisfied attitude of a European bureaucratic oligarchy convinced that it knew better and which has always been suspicious of the people. Whether this will have the effect of shaking the EU of its self-satisfaction remains to be seen, but Brexit is another syndrome of disunity. When one member of the family prefers to divorce, then it is the whole family which should have a look at itself.

Wanting to retrieve one's sovereignty, or preferring isolationism (in the case of President Trump), are signs of the defeat of debate, precisely what has made the western liberal tradition so special. From Tocqueville to John Stuart Mill, the great thinkers of the 19th century all insisted on the importance of systematic, long, arduous debates to solve political matters through compromise and get the closest to the truth as possible. After all, what is politics but precisely the moment when not being able to solve a problem individually, we get together to find a common solution? This is what has taught us tolerance and acceptance of pluralist views. We tend to forget that the enjoyment of this type of liberty is an education; it is something which has been long acquired through centuries of discussions in our western

societies, and it is still in the making every day. There is nothing natural about our liberty: ask Syrians under Assad whether they would rather have liberty or security and they will certainly choose the latter. Our liberal democracies fit us because they correspond to our past and our ways of life – that’s why too, they cannot be imposed on others.

The disunity of the West constitutes political resignation on a global western scale. The Brexiteers and the followers of Trump want to reach out for something better – and no one should blame them –, but in abandoning our common western ship to take their lifeboats towards what they believe is their own better shores, they are sanctioning our common inability to share responsibility towards each other, find compromise for a better future together and focus on what is our common inheritance: liberty under the rule of law.

2. Forgetting what “liberty under the law” means

So what do we mean by this expression? Fundamentally that we share a common political tradition of individual liberty, freedom of speech and a love of culture to elevate us, all protected by the rule of law. Of course, this does not mean that the UK, nor the USA, want to ditch such a tradition but, by wanting to go it alone, they are ignoring that the scattering of our forces in particularly difficult times is putting in danger what is the core of what we stand for. Our common values, founded on a long past, are something that we all take for granted in the West. It is perceived as being either elitist or romantic to go back to our foundational texts, but the work of the founding fathers in the USA or the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in France, did not come out of thin air (and I am not even mentioning Magna Carta). Those documents were written by those who fought hard to get the institutions and the rights which would empower the people to govern themselves. Those men believed, and often defended with their lives, that liberty under the rule of law is the best possibility given to men, in our western context, to grow and to develop the best version of themselves. Clearly liberal democracies are not perfect and only suited to a certain type of people, and in a certain context, but they offer us, in the West, the best possibility of having a say in the ways in which we are ruled. I am all too aware that it is the country of my birth and the protection it gives me – also as a woman – which allows me to speak and even to think in such a way. I take no risk in stating the obvious, but this would imprison me in many countries of the world today.

This is what makes me all too aware of how fragile the values of the West are. It is our common failure not to want to defend our democratic values collectively which is our weakness. The totalitarian threats of the past were easy to take on compared to the ones we face now, which are both disparate and far from being clear cut. The collective lack of understanding displayed at the NATO summit, and at the G7, must have been observed by Vladimir Putin and other anti-democratic leaders with a certain satisfaction. The more President Trump repeats “America First” and the more the UK repeats that Brexit is the possibility for Britain to control its own destiny, the more the message which comes out is that of distrust between friends. Of course, the UK is entitled to divorce if it wants to, and President Trump can openly offend allies and friends too, but we are far stronger together, less protectionist and less self-centered. Who can ask the awkward and embarrassing questions we need to face collectively better than a close-knit circle of like-minded people?

Who can hold accountable leaders to their promises but another set of like-minded leaders? That the EU project is weak is not a discovery, but over such issues as the migration crisis, the eurozone crisis, the environment predicament, the difficulties with Syria, Russia or North Korea and of course, the massive threat posed by Islamist terrorism, we cannot afford to suffer from a weakening of what we stand for. In this sense, more than in any other, Brexit is a real loss for the EU and for the unique ability the British had of shaking up their continental neighbours by asking the uncomfortable questions; by stating over and over again that the EU was going the wrong way with Federalism and that Europe was made up, first and foremost, of a variety of national democracies. They could do so because they were strong enough and respected enough. Whatever his ideas, the improbable sermons of Nigel Farage to the European Parliament forced to consider other opinions, not to accept mainstream ideas; to refuse polite acceptance and speak up to try and settle differences through debate. Farage's main victory was to show that the EU was not listening, that it did not want to engage in democratic debate and that it showed open contempt for the very many voices which had been expressing their doubts about the way the European project was going. I have been repeatedly told, in France that Brexit, is good riddance of the old Albion, but I fundamentally disagree because good political debate can only be held when there is a tension and a difficult opponent boxing at the same level. Undeniably, with the UK, there was tension, but it was between allies. What is more worrying with President Trump is that there does not seem to be a desire for debate at all, but only grand gesturing, the firm shaking of hands, the 140-words rhetoric and the politics of instincts over what unites us in the West.

Throughout it all though, there has been a silver lining: from Brexit to Trump's election, we have been able to witness how well our western institutions have weathered the storms. The system of checks and balances that the founding fathers did set up in the US political system are working and are holding the new President accountable; in the same way, the British system did rather well after the vote over the British exit in June 2016 and carries on even under the hung parliament created after the results of the General Election of 8 June. There is a remarkable capacity in western institutions to accept democratic decisions which would pull down the edifice of the state in other countries. But our political traditions are those of liberal democracies which cannot afford to be disunited when they are facing changes. The changes I am referring to are internal to our western democracies: they concern the changes in the relationship between the State and the people. We cannot do anything about globalisation, but we can do something about the way in which we do politics at a national level. This is where the French Presidential election and the Legislative elections have been rather surprising.

3. The lessons of the French Presidential and Legislative elections

The French Presidential election brought to power a young leader, who had just set up his own movement "En Marche" with the quixotic desire to re-enchant political life. Many have commented on how he is a product of the French system, a banker who had been a minister under François Hollande, and that he is only trying to make new politics out of old pots. Nevertheless, what Emmanuel Macron has achieved in France, whatever one may think of him, is nothing short of remarkable. He got to power with no party, in a country in which

parties dominate, with only a few people backing him, in less than a year. His program based on his book, entitled “Revolution”¹ – what else in France, one might ask? – was subtitled “Reconciling France”. Through his desire to moralize public life, to defend pluralism and to renew democratic political life by opening politics to newcomers, he has vowed to breathe in new life into an old, tired and nationalistic France.

Emmanuel Macron did not win overwhelmingly (66.10% of the vote, 21 million votes); nor can we paper over the more than 10 million people who voted for Marine Le Pen (double the score of her father in 2002), but his style and his desires have undeniably brought in something new in French political life. His aim to give politics a sense of purpose towards a collective project of renewing political life has intensified the honeymoon period proper to every Presidential election. The results of the French legislative election are showing that the candidates of his movement, renamed *La République en Marche* (the Republic moving on), have already won their target of sweeping over old ways of doing. More than 50.3% of the candidates are women, they are younger (47 years old as an average); out of 524 candidates, 281 have never held a political mandate before; they are mainly teachers, engineers, lawyers or from health related professions but also firemen, farmers or consultants; one out of two has gone through the higher education system and 80% of them use Twitter.²

There was something quite striking in his first speech on the night he won when he declared : “We are the heirs to a great history and to the great humanist message sent to the world. We must pass on this History and this message, first of all to our children, but even more importantly we must carry them into the future and give them new vigor”³. Leaving aside the obvious very French lyrical message, I was struck by the desire to renew with the past and the duty we had, as a nation, to find a new collective ideal. Clearly, this is what every single newly elected politician comes up with as he tries to give hope but it was the “great humanist message sent to the world” which was most striking. A cynic would see the French arrogance at work but there was more to it: this was the urgent appeal not to be contemptuous of what has made us collectively, to be proud of serving the State and not to look down on politics and despair of it. Reinvigorating national democratic life is only possible if we remember what initially made us a nation and Emmanuel Macron is trying to run a thin line between those who pull towards populism and those who want to impose the rule of experts.

It is urgent that what Emmanuel Macron has in stock, for France, works out because if not, the 10 million people who voted for Marine Le Pen will be there to remind him of his stumbles. His plan is also to try and reform the EU with a “new project for Europe”⁴ based on democratic conventions taking place in each of the 27 countries to re-legitimate the EU and to see what can be done to move out of a federalist project. Again, whether or not he will be able to do what he wants to, remains to be seen but, undeniably, there is a refusal of cynicism in politics which in itself is a novelty. If Emmanuel Macron succeeds in making politics

¹ Emmanuel Macron, *Révolution. Réconcilier la France*, Paris, Pocket, 2017, 256 pages.

² « Qui sont les candidats de la République en marche ? », *Le Monde*, 8 juin 2017, p. 10.

³ « Nous avons des devoirs envers notre pays, nous sommes les héritiers d’une grande Histoire et du grand message humaniste adressé au monde. Cette histoire et ce message, nous devons les transmettre d’abord à nos enfants, mais plus important encore, il nous faut les porter vers l’avenir et leur donner une sève nouvelle ». Emmanuel Macron, *Révolution. Réconcilier la France*, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

honorable again for all the French people who have lost faith in it, and do not even bother to vote anymore, this in itself will be a revolution.

Conclusion

To conclude, perhaps the most intricate aspect of Emmanuel Macron's project is that he has been accused of being a liberal. In France, this means to be focusing on market liberalism and is generally a disparaging description. His desire to force legislation, through the French Assembly to reform working laws, tends to show that this is truly where he is leaning. However, he also wants to focus on education, the environment and especially a grand scale moralisation of political life, leading to a tension in his project. He very regularly refers to what France owes to the Enlightenment but it is not Rousseau he is only mentioning – it is not the idea of the general will. He includes Montesquieu, a much more Anglo-liberal conception of politics which brings him to put forward a collective destiny based on individual responsibility, on tolerance and the practical exercise of freedom, much more than on the theoretical demands for it. He is attempting to resolve the tension in the different types of liberal democracies which have either naturally gone towards putting Liberty first, as Britain, or those, as France, which have chosen equality first. In running this thin line between the great tension – liberty and equality, which have different aims –, he is taking France towards something un-French.

In truth, there is a little cynical voice in me which has seen it all before: the young charismatic leader with a messianic pragmatic political standpoint, is all too reminiscent of Tony Blair in 1997. Twenty years later, I am a little too old to believe in miracles, but then again there is another voice, which wants to be re-encharmed with politics and which says “why not”. In ten years time, I wonder what I will be saying about myself, if I am invited at the Political forum again but, for all our sakes, I hope the democratic project of the West will reinvent itself at a national level, to bring us to safer shores all together at an international level.