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How Tony Blair won the French election

By Keith Spicer

PARIS. Cheery, helpful and peddling frightfully English common sense, Tony Blair stood before France's National Assembly on March 24, 1998 defining political success: "There is no right or left politics in economic management today," he told the 577 startled parliamentarians. "There is good and bad... There are no ideological preconditions, no pre-determined veto on means. What counts is what works." In left-right, dogma-split France, a provocation.

Blair may not be a candidate in the bitterly fought May 6 presidential runoff vote between neo-Gaullist Nicolas Sarkozy and Socialist Ségolène Royal. But both are his disciples – 'Sarko' a lot, 'Ségo' at least a little. So too is the now eliminated, but wildly courted, centrist candidate François Bayrou. Together, these politicians won over three quarters of all votes in the April 22 first round. With softening if still-significant left-right divisions, all camp in Blair's "extreme centre."

Other candidates? Extreme rightist Jean-Marie Le Pen, marginalized at 10.44 percent, sinks into colourful irrelevance. Diehard Marxists are now a music-hall joke. Voters almost dissolved France's Communist Party, and condemned four smaller "left-of-left" parties to devising, like Anglican prelates in a *Punch* cartoon, still more amusing little heresies.

The hugest heresy for France, Europe's laggard in economic literacy, has long been Tony Blair. The Third Way he designed, in cahoots with U.S. president Bill Clinton, did more than build on Margaret Thatcher's icy-hearted capitalist revolution. It junked old-socialist dogma to produce New Labour. Core idea: make free enterprise work, while keeping safety-nets for the needy. But without sky-high Scandinavian taxes.

Dynamism with solidarity. In France, most people think you can only have one or the other. Leaving entrepreneurs free to create wealth, claim leftists, means stealing from workers. Example: this month's obscene golden parachute for a failed executive at Airbus, even as huge layoffs occur. Over-protecting workers, say rightists, strangles business. Example: laws against firing even incompetents discourage hiring, thus growth.

Nine years after Blair offered his above advice, Britain's unemployment rate is half of France's. Hundreds of thousands of job-seeking French youth have taken the Eurostar train to London. French engineers flock to California. Intractable French unemployment and endless short-term jobs have blasted their hopes, costing France much of a generation's talent.

Yet Blair's ideas have gradually seeped into French public discourse. Mainstream

politicians (including President Jacques Chirac), commentators and unionists still greet them with suspicion as alien, “brutal Anglo-Saxon” recipes. But a small, out-shouted group of intellectuals – Nicolas Baverez and Claude Imbert, most eloquently – have defended *le blairisme*.

Is France’s old-marxist glacier finally starting to crack? Why a shift to the right, with the pendulum seeking uneasy peace in a pragmatic centre? As in now-booming Germany, leftist economic thinking in France is giving way to Blairism because of a frozen-in-time economy. But also because of three plausible, ready-for-change leaders.

Sarkozy is jogging, cycling, hyper-agitated proof that thermonuclear energy is harnessable. He promises to break France’s crippling economic habits, yet protect the weak. Royal, an ever-elegant Alice in Wonderland, got booed by her old guard just for faintly praising Blair. She had to scurry back to leftist shibboleths (“soak the rich!”) but still hints at Blairite flexibilities. On reform, Ségo is to Sarko as Ginger Rogers to Fred Astaire: she matches his movements, but dances backward and in high heels. Both are dancing to Blair’s tune.

In the bitterly close runoff campaign, both are trying to steal voters from Bayrou’s centre. Sarko, having successfully fished away extreme-right voters with immigrant-bashing, is now sliding left to centre by playing Mr. Warm-and-Cuddly. Aping Bayrou, he even promises a cover-the-waterfront, right-centre-left coalition. Ségo, having played to her leftist base in round one, is now sliding right to centre, hyping a “just order,” discipline and perhaps an economics-savvy prime minister. Panic reigns.

Before the first round, Sarko and Ségo both mocked Bayrou as lacking constituency, organization and ideas. Now, as king-or-queen-maker, he mocks them. Even-handedly rejecting both candidates’ pleas for alliance, he dismisses Royal is risky for the economy, Sarkozy for democracy and social peace.

But he betrays smoldering contempt for Sarko as a petty intriguer, a bully with a “taste for intimidation and threats.” Sarko was already apoplectic as he watched Royal publicly debating the “defeated” candidate even before she debates him. He must now worry that Bayrou’s gentler comments on Royal, plus Bayrou’s damn-the-torpedoes announcement of a new parliamentary party, may lead centrist voters to beat him by a sliver on May 6.

Whoever wins then, Blair will have supplied much of the script. After he exits 10 Downing St. in July, he can smile as he sees either the Fred Astaire or Ginger Rogers of French politics dancing through the Élysée Place. And watching “loser” Bayrou winning a ton of seats in the National Assembly, scene of Blair’s shocking crime.