

Will the Left help Marine Le Pen become France's next president?



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So there you have it. Next year's French presidential election will be contested between the hard Right and the far Right; between [the no holds barred free-marketeer Francois Fillon](#), who has just won the republican nomination, and the Neo-Fascist Marine Le Pen. It is a catastrophe of democracy, an argument for the withdrawal of the franchise from the plebs, who have proved themselves utterly unworthy of the vote, stupid racists that they are.

That is the narrative that is now being spun in some quarters in France, where a demoralised Socialist party – its leader ridiculed, its support in tatters – is looking for answers to its great collapse. But the story they are telling themselves could not be more wrong.

For a start, it features traditional characters cast in a traditional plot – where politicians of Left to Right slug it out against each other until their champions from the centre ground vie for victory. Not this time.

This time the fringes are flourishing. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who has just been endorsed by the Communist Party, is predicted handsomely to beat François Hollande, France's centre-Left president, in the first round of next year's presidential polls – if Hollande even stands. Fillon himself will get less support than Le Pen before the two of them go head-to-head in the second, decisive round of voting.

Mélenchon is often described as Marine Le Pen's "rival", as though the pair were locked in some Newtonian experiment, in which any political action by the one leads to an equal and opposite reaction by the other. This may be comforting for those on the "progressive" Left, for whom Le Pen is the very devil. But it is not true. Mélenchon is fiercely anti-free market, cherishing the rights and welfare of those in what he calls his "workers movement". Marine le Pen too is a heartfelt protectionist promising to defend workers benefits. Both loathe the EU.

Much as it may demoralise the Socialist Party in France, it has not been more clear for decades that our traditional conceptions of Left and Right have buckled to the point of irrelevance, particularly on the fringes. And this leads politicians to make foolish assumptions about the policies they need to deliver to capture public support.

In the case of Francois Fillon, it is assumed that the Front National will attack him from the traditional Right, on immigration and security, and that he will have to respond accordingly. It is certainly true that he cannot afford to ignore these issues. No candidate in a country that has suffered as many deadly terrorist attacks as France recently can be seen to be soft on national defence.

But Fillon has already staked out a hawkish position on both topics. He has called for an annual quota for immigrants of "very, very much less than 100,000". He also wants to

scrap “family reunion”, under which prospective migrants can apply to join relatives living in France, once that threshold is reached. And he thinks priority should be given to those immigrants “with the skills the country needs”.

He has thought hard, too, about the threat posed by Islamic Extremism. All French politicians feel obliged to issue worthy books describing their political vision. Fillon got in early though, publishing his, *Faire* (“To Do”), last year. That meant that this year he was able to publish another tome. It is entitled: “Defeating Islamic Totalitarianism”.

The point that French socialists, and François Hollande above all, need to accept and take responsibility for, is that the Front National is not primarily going to attack Fillon from the Right. It is going to attack him from the traditional Left. Marine Le Pen is going after “Left-wing” voters. And for all their good intentions, there is every indication that some of these voters will be tempted. France’s oldest union, the CGT, immediately greeted Fillon’s nomination with the threat of strikes. And who will be joining them on the barricades? The Front National, which equally swiftly attacked his proposed welfare state reforms as “death to the people”.

When Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the second round of the presidential election in 2002, no one on the Left voted for him; the stench of racism and anti-Semitism hung too heavily around him. But Marine, as she has rebranded herself, has a nativist message that is much less toxic, or at least sufficiently less toxic to appeal to many on the Left too. After Mélenchon is eliminated in the first round of voting, it is inconceivable that any of his supporters transfer their votes to Fillon. Not so Le Pen.

In his book *Submission*, Michel Houellebecq imagines a France in which the Socialists, doing anything to prevent a Front National victory, help an Islamist president take power. The reality next year may turn out to be even more extraordinary: that it is actually the Thatcherite reformer, Fillon, that the Left is determined to stop at all costs, and that, for some of them at least, supporting the Front National is the price worth paying.