

‘But They All Do It’



Marine

Le Pen

by Theodore Dalrymple

A disturbing pattern has emerged in French presidential elections: A credible candidate is found almost at the last minute to have committed an illegal act, the revelation of which is intended to spoil or destroy altogether the candidate's electoral chances.

The latest “victim” of this pattern is [Marine Le Pen](#), who is facing the incumbent president, Emmanuel Macron, in the forthcoming second round of the French presidential election, a repeat of the contest of 2017. The main difference between the two contests is that, this time round, the polls give Le Pen at least some slight chance of victory, while last time Macron gained not only an overwhelming victory, but from the first had also appeared likely to do so. The outcome was never in any kind of doubt, as it is now.

Le Pen is usually described as being of the far right, though in fact her economic ideas are in some respects not very different from those of the candidate of the far left, Jean-Luc Mélançon, who came not very far behind her in the first round of the election, in which the two candidates who receive the most votes go forward to the second, and decisive, round.

Perhaps economic affinity helps to explain why almost as many voters for the far-left candidate say they will vote for the candidate of the far right as say they will vote for the centrist candidate, Macron. Mélançon himself has expressed the wish that not a single one of his voters should vote for Le Pen, without, however, having asked them to vote for Macron. He seems, then, to be hoping for a high rate of abstention, which would strengthen his argument that the current French political system is undemocratic and illegitimate, and that the country needs yet another new constitution.

Le Pen has just been accused by the European Union's antifraud office of malversation of funds, 136,993.99 euros (about \$148,000) of the Union's money to be precise, while she was a member of the European Parliament between 2004 and 2017. For example, she is accused of having claimed 23,100 euros (about \$25,000) for the purchase of little objects such as pens and bags to be given out at her political party's annual conference in 2014, which is not allowed under the rules.

It might be a coincidence that the accusation of something that was allegedly done eight years ago has emerged in the week before the election, but I do not think many people will be found to believe it. After all, Le Pen is decidedly hostile to the European Union, while Macron is almost a religious devotee of it. There are no prizes for guessing, then, which of the two candidates the Union would prefer to win.

This is not the same as saying that Le Pen is innocent, which is why I put inverted commas round the word "victim." When I

mentioned the allegation to a French friend, who voted for Mélanchon and had decided to abstain in the second round, though she said she preferred Le Pen to Macron, she exclaimed "But they all do it!"

This was what was commonly said when François Fillon, the favorite to win the 2017 presidential election, was suddenly (and conveniently) revealed to have employed his wife at public expense for a fictitious job. He was not innocent, but he had been doing it for at least 15 years. Could it really have been mere coincidence that it came to light just as he was set fair to win an election? True, a presidential candidate's record comes under unusually close scrutiny, but Fillon had also been prime minister, so that he was by no means an unknown figure.

It's difficult to resist the conclusion that it's someone's candidacy, not his fraud, that his accusers object to.

While the accusation of fraud sank Fillon's electoral chances (he was subsequently sentenced to five years' imprisonment, a sentence that he's still appealing), many people in France shrugged their shoulders in the belief that what he had done, while criminal, was normal for the political class, and that there must be many others in the same boat.

It's instructive to compare this with an anecdote about Charles de Gaulle when he was facing François Mitterrand in the presidential election. His team came to him with very discreditable information about Mitterrand (not very difficult to find). De Gaulle, however, refused to use it. He said that he had always known that Mitterrand was an unscrupulous scoundrel, but if by chance he won the election, he would still be president of the Republic. De Gaulle, who was hardly free of ego, recognized that the position was greater than the man—any man.

Awkward and difficult as he was, perhaps even megalomaniac,

there's no doubt that de Gaulle had a certain probity. No one ever accused him of feeding at the trough of public expenditure, for instance, or of having his finger in many commercial pies. He never amassed a huge fortune, nor did he peddle influence or join the board of giant corporations after his retirement from political life at an immense salary for doing very little. He could therefore take an elevated, even lordly, view of politics, because he could not himself ever have been accused of the kind of wrongdoing that, alas, we now expect of our elected representatives.

"They all do it," "They are all the same"—how many times have I heard this! And if they all do it, and they are all the same, but we must nevertheless choose one among them, we feel besmirched ourselves, as if we had participated in something discreditable or even disgusting. And this is one of the dangerous feelings that makes people hanker after something other than democracy.

The accusation against Le Pen could conceivably backfire, so patently is it timed to influence the election, but I still think that Macron will win. Furthermore, I think any other result would be extremely dangerous, even catastrophic, for France, which is not to avow any admiration whatsoever for Macron. Most elections, not only in France, are a choice between *la peste et le choléra*, the plague and cholera.

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