

Neither France Nor Britain Made an Ideological Shift, and All Parties Will Be Pitching Toward the Center

By Conrad Black

The two important European elections are easy to misunderstand. Neither constituted the apparent ideological shift that appeared to occur and that had been anticipated in both the United Kingdom and France. The British had to defeat the Conservatives – for the first time in British history, the same party had put up five prime ministers in eight years and they had all failed.

David Cameron led Britain to an all or nothing referendum on remaining in the European Union, and he lost. Theresa May interpreted the narrow Brexit vote to depart the European Union as being, in effect, a vote to remain within Europe while claiming to leave it, with the inevitable result that after three years she had no support from anyone.

Boris Johnson efficiently accomplished Brexit but so offended his own party and the entire country by his buffoonery and, in some cases, lack of integrity that his government fell in underneath him, and he was rusticated by his own party, to the loud cheers of the opposition.

Liz Truss gained the premiership on a return to Thatcherism and produced a brilliant Thatcherite budget of reduced taxes and incentives to economic growth, but gave an unconvincing summary of how the program would be funded, and she was driven from office with the record-breaking celerity of 45 days.

Rishi Sunak followed but was completely incapable of producing

an innovative program to deal with Britain's stagnant economy and other problems and has led the conservatives to the most overwhelming defeat in the country's nearly 300-year history. Margaret Thatcher's achievement in remaking the Red Tories into an authentic conservative party, and Tony Blair's accomplishment in making Labour a center-left party have both been substantially rolled back and squandered.

The lopsided result of last week's election, though, does not imply any thundering acclamation for the victorious Labour Party despite its huge parliamentary majority. Its share of popular support remained practically unchanged at 34 percent but approximately a third of the former supporters of the Conservative Party deserted it, either to the moderate left liberal Democrats or the unambiguously populist conservative Reform Party.

That knocked conservative vote totals beneath Labour in scores of constituencies, producing labor pluralities in almost 200 constituencies where the Labour Party's vote had scarcely, if at all, increased from the 2020 election. After 14 years of generally incompetent Conservative rule, that party simply had to be punished.

It has been, but the roadmap back to office need not be lengthy or complicated. There is no indication whatever that Labour has the answer to the country's principal problems, and its leader, Keir Starmer, has given no indication whatever that he has the remotest idea of how to relaunch the country's economy, improve national services, staunch the unpopular inflow of not easily assimilable immigration, and make the most of the potential that Britain's departure from Europe opened up for a more prosperous relationship with America and the senior members of the Commonwealth, especially Canada and Australia.

After World War II and the disintegration of the British Empire, the United Kingdom has attempted to make a coherent

political bloc of the Commonwealth, then to plunge headlong into Europe, and then to place its bets on the special relationship with the United States that had its great moment of glory with Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt and a partial revival with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

Neither Sir Keir nor any member of his new government have so much as hinted about how they might tackle these problems, and there is every reason to fear the worst. If the Conservatives choose an authentic conservative and competent leader they will probably be back in four years,

In France, as always, it is more complicated. The three principal parties in Sunday's legislative elections were all political formations that have not existed under the same names for even ten years. The apparently leading group is the coalition of the left comprising the communists, socialists, greens, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's far left Marxist party, France Unbowed, that regards the French communists as insufficiently zealous in their views.



Reacting to results of the second round of legislative elections, July 7, 2024, at Nantes, France. AP/Jeremias Gonzalez

President Macron's supporters, who have made a reasonable effort toward responsible centrist government, came a narrow second, and the much reformed and house-trained National Rally

has come in a close third. The last remaining approximately ten percent belongs to the traditional Republicans, a responsible center right group. Mr. Macron has saved, at least temporarily, the French pension system by raising the retirement age to 64. The NR proposes 62 and the left-wing coalition 60. Neither alternative is affordable.

The possibilities for government going forward are that Mr. Macron will try to assemble a nonpartisan technocratic caretaker administration and apart from that, govern by decree from the presidential office until the next election, in which Mr. Macron himself cannot stand, comes around again in 2027. The alternatives are that the president's party could attempt to find common ground with the leftists and put some sort of hybrid program through, but it is almost certainly unlikely to be successful.

More promising would be if the RN leader, Marine LePen, continued her long march toward the center from the far right and managed to agree on a sensible program with Mr. Macron's party. This is not mentioned at the moment as a serious alternative by anyone, but it is the only option that makes any sense at this point.

Mr. Macron is a dedicated Euro-Federalist, an impassioned believer in the more radical climate change theories and official remedies, and is a curious mélange of a reasonable bourgeois conservatism and an unlimited commitment to contemporary faddish ambitions. He is barred from seeking a third consecutive term and as his party was just founded by him seven years ago and has been renamed and reconfigured a number of times, it has little durable definition apart from its support for the president wherever he may lead.

As there is no mandate for a lurch to the left or the right nor a sufficient mandate continuing in the center, the immediate future course of France would allow ample reason for worry, except the French in their cynicism, don't take

politics too seriously and rarely inflict significant damage on themselves.

The future may rest largely in the hands of young leaders of whom we do not know much, including Mr. Macron's prime minister, Gabrielle Attal, 35, and Madame LePen's would-be prime minister, Jordan Bardella, a precocious 28. The French are now awakening from their customary world-weary disdain of politics to require action on the Islamic issues within France and the inadequate performance of the economy of this fundamentally rich and highly sophisticated country.

These and other questions will require that President Macron be succeeded by a person of at least equivalent stature. Such good news as there is, is that all of the major political movements will be pitching to the political center. In the end, Madame Le Pen should be more capable of that than the pantomime horse of the left.

First published in the [New York Sun](#)