

The British Left are desperate for good news – Macron and Schulz will disappoint them

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With Jeremy Corbyn's Labour in constant decline, those on the British mainstream left are hoping that European social democracy could at least be revived by our neighbours. But Martin Schulz and Emmanuel Macron may not achieve what many are hoping for, explains [Tom Angier](#). He outlines three reasons why this is the case.



The new kids on the Franco-German bloc, Emmanuel Macron and Martin Schulz, are creating quite a stir on the British 'centre left'. This is hardly surprising. With the Tories in the driving seat, and Labour a paler version of the Socialist Workers' Party, the prospects of a mainstream left alternative at home look bleak. How gratifying, then, that our biggest and most influential neighbours seem to have beaten us to it, offering social democratic policies.

To many, these relative strangers appear beacons of hope in a politically storm-tossed world, men standing up valiantly to the women on their right (Le Pen, Merkel, Petry). But despite this widespread rumour, and the irrational faith still being expressed in favourable polls, both candidates demonstrate fundamental weaknesses – Macron especially. Why so? For three main reasons.

First, current political feeling in the West is deeply suspicious of so-called 'elite' or 'establishment' figures. Granted, this suspicion is insufficiently articulated and may be self-deceiving – Trump, after all, is part of the US financial elite. But that is strategically irrelevant: candidates for political office must do their best to downplay their reliance on and allegiance to extant power structures.



Macron managed this insofar as he cleverly extricated himself from the Socialist Party. But given his background, that move is wholly inadequate – for not only is he an establishment figure, he is hyper-establishment. Attending the Ecole Normale d'Administration and groomed by *les gracques*, he then went on to allegedly earn millions at Rothschild's. Although Macron is irritated by those who stereotype him as a rich banker, the charge sticks that bureaucratic and financial elites provide his natural milieu. He may be comfortable in Algeria, castigating the sins of French colonialism, but he will be far less at ease among the farmers of *la France profonde*. When taken together with his transatlantic sympathies and Anglophone credentials, he may endear himself to UK expats, but is putting himself dangerously at odds with the French political tradition.

As to Schulz, the bookseller-mayor from Würselen, he may have comparatively humble beginnings, but has ended up the bureaucratic insider *par excellence*. As President of the EU Parliament, he helpfully informed his audience that 'it is not the EU Philosophy that the crowd can decide its fate'. So despite some ham-fisted populist gestures – 'Make Europe Great Again' – and the advantage of an electorate less averse to stolid bureaucrats, he too lacks any genuine earthiness or common touch.

Second, both Macron and Schulz are, in British terms, essentially third-way Blairites. This may hold great appeal for those nostalgic for the safer, more clement political and economic environment of a decade ago, but from today's vantage-point it looks naive.

Macron, for his part, claims to transcend left and right, and to combine the best of both: retaining France's early retirement age, for example, and boosting some welfare and job schemes, but also shifting the French labour market in an Anglo-American direction (the 35-hour week will be at the discretion of employers). The worry is that this recently-declared platform is not so much both-and as neither-nor: not left enough, because Macron wants to reduce taxes on the rich and remove key worker entitlements, yet not right enough either, because he is an avidly pro-EU globalist, impatient with any concerns over immigration. In short, he is offering French variants of globalism and liberalism; by contrast, Le Pen is offering the heady brew of (without wishing to sound alarmist) nationalism and socialism.

In today's France, Macron's seems the far riskier strategy. Crossing the Rhine, Schulz seems to face fewer obstacles. Unlike his French counterpart, he is not trying to introduce market reforms alien to the national tradition, and moreover faces nationalist challengers who are far weaker. Nonetheless, because the German economy is already strong – affording a better deal for the poor – and this after the prolonged rule of Schulz's main opponent, German voters may see less need for his left-leaning economic plans in general, and his desire to revisit the labour reforms of 2010 in particular.

Third, there are the vexed issues of immigration and Islamism. Macron appears breathtakingly insouciant on both, welcoming more immigration and adopting a relaxed, distinctly 'Anglo-Saxon' approach to Muslim headscarves in universities. Schulz wants to drive a wedge between security, on the one hand, and justice, on the other – putting all his policy emphasis on the latter. But such approaches serve merely to expose their joint Achilles' heel. For neither candidate can long pretend that immigration is basically a non-issue, or that security is not an essential element of justice.

Indeed, if there are further terrorist attacks in the months to come, their evasions on these issues will be brutally apparent. No doubt they would both scramble to harden their rhetoric, perhaps reneging on the headscarf issue (Sarkozy did the same), or promising to spend more on surveillance. But this will be too little, too late in the eyes of vast swathes of the electorate, and provide the perfect opportunity for hard-line nationalists to seize the upper hand.

We know already that French youth, seemingly unlike their British *confrères*, are disproportionately drawn to the hard right – and in a country that has so far borne the brunt of Islamist terrorism, no number of sombre looks from a young, attractive candidate will persuade them to change their mind. Likewise for Schulz: Germany's unprecedented social experiment with immigration is fraught with political dangers, and unless he takes more explicit policy positions on it – capitalising on Merkel's mistakes, without falling into the outright rejectionism of Petry – his entire political programme is liable to be cast as an anachronism.

In sum, although it is understandable that those on the British mainstream left are desperate for good news, Schulz, and especially Macron, will have a tough time being that news. At a moment of marked global insecurity, inequality and increasing distrust of both social and economic liberalism, these two men are sounding notes that may ensure their rapid political oblivion. No amount of policy detail combined with vapid slogans like 'On the Move!' – which could cover everything from fascism to a running club – will be taken seriously without the assurance that they are responsive to *current* political realities. In the absence of this assurance, they will be dismissed as just another pair of aspiring technocrats.

About the Author

Tom Angier is Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Cape Town.

