

French Social Democracy in Turmoil

PHILIPPE MARLIÈRE 

Abstract

For decades, the Parti socialiste (PS) was the major party of the French left. It elected a president three times and was a ruling party on several occasions between 1981 and 2017, at which point it suffered crushing defeats in the 2017 presidential and legislative elections. Since then, the PS has been between a rock and a hard place: on the left, it is dominated by Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise (LFI, Unbowed France) and on the right by Macron's Renaissance party. The success of both parties has a lot to do with the PS's own setbacks. Emmanuel Macron's election in 2017 was rendered possible by internal conflicts in the PS during François Hollande's term. Those who thought that Benoît Hamon's candidacy was too left-wing that year, or those who now regard an alliance with Mélenchon as 'illegitimate', found refuge in Macron's party. This article aims to explain the reasons for the PS's dramatic setbacks and to explore its prospects for recovery.

Keywords: French socialism, Parti Socialiste, France Insoumise, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, social democracy, France

Introduction

IN THE RUN-UP to the 2022 presidential election, the authoritative daily *Le Monde* did not mince its words regarding the *Parti socialiste*'s (PS) campaign:

Such a low level of intentional votes is unprecedented in the history of Le Parti socialiste that ruled the left for almost half a century. It should scare everyone, but the fading Hidalgo campaign is like a slow-motion crash test. Or a train running wild out of its tracks with nobody paying attention.¹

Those are very harsh words indeed. But, in the end, the assessment was correct: Anne Hidalgo, the socialist candidate, secured a paltry 1.75 per cent of the share of the vote in the first round of the election.

In the history of European social democracy, the PS's recent downfall stands out. With the benefit of hindsight, it would be tempting to claim today that this 'socialist collapse comes

from afar'.² In truth, no one saw it coming. It remains quite difficult to explain why the dominant party of the French left suffered two crushing defeats in the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections and why it has such a modest parliamentary representation in the National Assembly today.

What caused the 2017 electoral car crash?

Dominant on the left until 2012 and one of the two main parties in French politics (along with the conservative *Républicains*), the PS suffered a calamitous electoral car crash. It is not the 2017 defeats that surprised observers, but their sheer magnitude. Seven years on, the PS is showing little sign of a national recovery, although it remains influential through its strong local base of municipalities across France. Compared to François Hollande's 28.6 per cent share in 2012, Benoît Hamon's 6.3 per cent share in 2017 underlined the depth and brutality of the PS's downfall. In the

¹G. Paris, 'Will there still be a French Parti socialiste in April?', *Le Monde*, 14 March 2022; https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2022/03/14/will-there-still-be-a-french-parti-socialiste-in-april_5978560_23.html#

²M. Fulla, 'Un effondrement socialiste qui vient de loin', *The Conversation*, 12 April 2022; <https://theconversation.com/un-effondrement-socialiste-qui-vient-de-loin-181122>

legislative elections, the party's 7.4 per cent share in the first round was also extremely weak compared to the party's 29.3 per cent in 2012. It represented a drop from 289 to thirty seats. Previously, the worst electoral result had been the first round of the 1993 legislative elections, when the PS received 17.5 per cent of the share of the vote and had fifty-seven deputies elected.

In 2012, the PS concentrated most political powers: besides the presidency, it had an absolute majority in the National Assembly and could legislate as it saw fit. It was the main party in the senate for the first time in the Fifth Republic and it ran France's major city councils (Paris, Lyon, Lille, Nantes, Rennes, Reims, Strasbourg and Toulouse) as well as fifteen out of twenty-one regions. However, it turns out that the PS was a political colossus with feet of clay. Hollande defeated Sarkozy quite narrowly in the 2012 presidential election, with 51.64 per cent to Sarkozy's 48.36 per cent. This was the second smallest margin in the run-off since the beginning of the Fifth Republic. The campaign focussed on Sarkozy's record and the incumbent president was deeply unpopular: anti-Sarkozyism mobilised voters from the left, but also from the centre-right. The PS was also boosted by the two-ballot majoritarian system in the first round of the legislative election: with only 29.4 per cent of the vote, it received an absolute majority.

The 2017 election marked the end of a long phase of political domination, which relied on the PS's ability to appeal to various constituencies: blue collar workers, white collar workers and significant segments of professionals. The backing of various social classes—key to the PS's electoral successes throughout the 1970s and up to the 2010s—progressively stalled. First, working class support was on the wane. Until the 1990s, the party had ties with blue collar workers, notably in its northern bastions of Nord-Pas-de-Calais. From 1978 onwards, the working class vote shifted from the PCF (French Communist Party) to the PS. Between 1978 and 1988, the PS was—for a short spell—a true social democratic party with strong working class backing and over 200,000 members—a decent-sized membership by French standards.³ But this did not last long. From the 1990s onward, the PS started losing its blue collar support. By the 2010s, a third of them voted for the

far-right *Front National* (FN) and many had simply stopped voting. The party still had around 170,000 members in 2012. Today, there are barely 40,000 fee-paying members.⁴ The party has lost three quarters of its members since François Hollande's election in 2012.

The PS is a party that had arguably 'stopped talking to the popular categories' long before the 2017 car crash.⁵ In a 2011 memo, Terra Nova (think tank) attempted to make the PS's abandonment of working class voters official.⁶ The memo's authors argued that the working classes did not want or could not adapt to a competitive and open society and, therefore, were to be left to their fate. As a result, the memo suggested turning toward different 'excluded groups' described as 'open', 'optimistic' and 'tolerant' such as the young, women, minorities, the unemployed and insecure workers. From an electoral perspective, such an approach seemed unwise: 56 per cent of blue collar workers and 51 per cent of all employees still voted for Ségolène Royal in the second round of the 2007 presidential election. From a sociological perspective, the Terra Nova memo ignored the sociological realities observed over many years of research in the field. The issues dividing generations, genders, ethnicities or income brackets (and thus defining class conflict) have both socioeconomic and cultural causes. Types of domination are neither purely socioeconomic nor cultural; they are intersectional as they overlap and add up.⁷

³R. Ladrech and P. Marlière, 'The French socialist party', in R. Ladrech and P. Marlière, eds., *Social Democratic Parties in the European Union: History, Organisation, Policies*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1999, pp. 64–78.

⁴L'INA, 'L'évolution du nombre d'adhérents au PS depuis 1973', *ina*, 18 January 2023; <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/ps-parti-socialiste-adherents-militant-solferino>

⁵R. Lefebvre and F. Sawicki, 'Pourquoi le PS ne parle-t-il plus aux catégories populaires?', *Mouvements*, vol. 2, no. 50, 2007, pp. 24–32.

⁶O. Ferrand, R. Prudent and B. Jeanbart, 'Gauche: quelle majorité électorale pour 2012?', *Terra Nova*, 10 May 2011; <https://tnova.fr/democratie/politique-institutions/gauche-quelle-majorite-electorale-pour-2012/>

⁷P. Marlière, 'À quoi sert le Parti socialiste?', *Mouvements*, vol. 1, no. 69, 2012, pp. 85–92.

The truth of the matter is that the PS never secured close links with blue collar workers for a variety of reasons. From 1920 onwards, the SFIO—French Section of the Workers' International, the original party name—then the PS, had to compete with the PCF, a truly workers' party that established organic links with the CGT (General Confederation of Labour), the main French trade union. The PS was never a mass party, unlike most social democratic parties in northern Europe and Scandinavia. Additionally, because of the rivalry and political competition with the PCF, the PS never quite managed to adjust its rather radical discourse to its reformist action. For all these reasons, support from the working class was never guaranteed for the PS. This marks a major difference with most other social democratic parties in Europe.⁸

The PS's rise to power in the 1980s coincided with the electoral breakthrough of the far right. During François Mitterrand's first term in office (1981–1988), the FN was able to impose its political agenda: immigration and the alleged 'incompatibility' between Islam and 'French republican values' and these topics began to be debated in the political mainstream. The narrowing of the PS's electoral base (notably of its working class support) was patent in 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen qualified for the second round of the presidential election. Lionel Jospin's performance, as socialist candidate, was unexpectedly poor and he came third in the race.

Between 2012 and 2017, President Hollande had to fight high unemployment and his economic and social policies left his electoral base disenfranchised and angry. Evidence of this included the electoral defeats in the 2014 municipal and the 2015 regional elections. Hollande's presidency was marked by the pursuit of austerity policies and supply-side economics—allegedly to boost economic competitiveness. His economic platform was based on the reduction of labour costs to enhance employment and investment. This was quite a far cry from Hollande's claim at a rally in the run up to the 2012 election and in his campaign programme that 'his enemy was finance'. Once elected, he broke his main

campaign pledges—like the 75 per cent tax on the wealthiest—or dramatically watered down pledges such as gradual and fairer tax reform or a law on the separation and regulation of banking activities. Government officials kept repeating that there was no alternative to those policies in today's world. The French socialists in power ironically embraced the third way mantra almost twenty years after New Labour in the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, in the 2010s, the UK Labour Party under Ed Miliband had started to distance itself from Blairite economics.⁹

François Hollande somewhat surprisingly defined his fiscally conservative policies as 'social democratic', but even by Blairite standards, this was not social democratic economics. Blairism fully followed market economics and neoliberal globalisation, but it also involved in-depth redistribution through a proactive state in the economy. However, the French socialist government's economic policies lacked this dimension. Hollande's use of the adjective 'social democratic' further discredited the notion on the French left. French socialists have always seen themselves as 'socialists' not 'social democrats'. The former indicates a critical relationship with capitalism, whereas the latter sounds far too accommodating of it.¹⁰ Consequently, in France, the notion of 'social democracy' is now commonly associated with centrist politics.

One should bear in mind that Emmanuel Macron was closely associated with these policies, first as Hollande's Élysée advisor, then as finance minister in a socialist government. When the PS criticises Macron's 'right-wing economics' today, it ought to acknowledge that those policies were first implemented by Macron himself at the end of Hollande's presidency. In short, Hollande's economics ran counter to classic social democratic policies of state intervention and redistributionism. The irony is that these policies did not bear fruit by the time Hollande left the Élysée Palace; rather, they paved the way for Macron's

⁹E. Goes, *The Labour Party under Ed Miliband: Trying but Failing to Renew Social Democracy*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016.

¹⁰P. Marlière, 'De Lionel Jospin à Ségolène Royal: l'introuvable troisième voie du socialisme français', *Mouvements*, vol. 2, no. 50, 2007, pp. 14–23.

⁸P. Marlière, 'Introduction', in Ladrech and Marlière, eds., *Social Democratic Parties*, pp. 4–5.

neoliberal reforms from 2017 onwards. In addition, unemployment remained high in 2017 and inequalities increased. In the end, Hollande's policies angered some of his backbenchers as well as large segments of his electorate.

This time round, Hollande could not point to any progressive reforms on a par with those of the Mitterrand presidencies—like nationalisation, the granting of a fourth week of paid holiday, the reduction in retirement age to 60 or the thirty-five-hour-week reforms of the Jospin government. This was the first time that the left in power could not claim any significant left-wing reforms. A modest tax on capital, the raising of the minimum wage or the increase in the school year allowance cannot be considered 'flagship measures' for the left.

François Hollande's economic policies were strongly contested by socialist MPs and activists. A group of socialist parliamentarians, nicknamed *frondeurs* (rebels) by the media, opposed and even voted against some of the government's reforms. The last year of Hollande's single term was marked by two reform proposals which further antagonised the socialist base. One proposed to enshrine in the constitution the stripping of French nationality from those convicted of terrorist crimes. France has many migrants and this extremely severe measure dismayed many socialist officials, activists and voters. Hollande eventually gave up on the idea, but it left the party divided and scarred. The other bill proposal planned to reform the labour market by loosening up employment regulations. This yet again represented a major break from the party's previous policies and doctrine on the topic. Social movements strongly opposed it to no avail. The law was finally adopted, despite remonstrations on the left. This further angered left-wing voters, made Hollande even more unpopular and it explains to some extent why those voters deserted the PS in droves in the 2017 presidential election. Many of them voted for Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who pledged to ditch Hollande's reforms were he to be elected.

The dwindling number of PS members had another negative effect. From the 1990s onwards, the PS became what Angelo Panebianco labelled an 'electoral-professional party'—that is, a publicly funded party, media-driven rather than based on a mass membership

and with its electoral performance its main objective.¹¹ With fewer members, the PS also turned into a 'party of elected officials'—that is, a party in which many members hold an elected position at the local, regional or national levels. In other words, the PS progressively lost touch with its voters and with the population in general.

Beyond political divisions, the party has an image problem. Since their retirement from politics or their death, party grandees (like Lionel Jospin, Laurent Fabius, Michel Rocard, Pierre Joxe, Martine Aubry, Ségolène Royal, Henri Emmanuelli and others) have progressively been replaced with younger and untested party officials. Anne Hidalgo may be the mayor of Paris, but she has never played any significant role in the party or in national politics. Benoît Hamon was also little known outside the party circles and his 2017 programme represented a major policy shift to the left compared to the Hollande era. To win a presidential election, the PS will first have to generate competent party figures: it currently lacks this type of savvy and popular politician.

The PS is currently in decline at the national level, so it is paramount to maintain its local and regional base. Once a powerful party at the local and regional levels, it suffered important losses during the Hollande presidency. Between 2008 and 2014, the PS lost 160 cities of more than 10,000 inhabitants that it governed (eleven of which were of more than 100,000 inhabitants). It also lost fifteen regions out of twenty-one in the 2015 regional elections. These are worrying trends. The presidential contest may be the decisive election in French politics, but it is nonetheless impossible for a party to dominate French politics without solid local or regional anchoring. Should the PS make further losses locally, its position would be further weakened.

The uneasy left unity (2022–2023)

The launch of NUPES (New Ecological and Social People's Union) days before the two rounds of legislative elections on 12 and 19 June 2022 dramatically altered the political

¹¹A. Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organisation and Power*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 264.

mood on the left. Until then, the prospects for the left looked quite bleak. Despite Jean-Luc Mélenchon's strong showing in the first round of the presidential race—garnering 21.95 per cent of the vote—the left had again failed to qualify for the second round. Disunited, the various parties of the left seemed destined for another crushing defeat in the legislative elections. This new 'union of the left' (after those of 1971–1978 and 1997–2002) posed new challenges for a much weakened PS.

NUPES was an electoral coalition that gathered the main left-wing parties between June 2022 and October 2023: the PS, LFI, PCF, EELV (the Green party) as well as smaller parties such as *Génération.s*, *Génération Écologie* and the *Nouveaux Démocrates*. The new alliance's programme was of a radical reformist nature. It was in line with the radicalism of the Common Programme of the 1970s, although commentators noted that it was less radical than the 1972 agreement as it did not call for a transitional break with capitalism.¹² As Thomas Piketty put it, the united left put 'social and fiscal justice' back on the political agenda (its flagship policies roll back the retirement age to 60 and raise the minimum wage).¹³ The NUPES road map also set out ecological planning and a 'golden climate rule' designed to protect biodiversity, fight environmental pollution and reduce greenhouse gases.

LFI was the dominant force within NUPES: with 325 candidates across France, Mélenchon's movement accounted for just over 56 per cent of NUPES candidates. Unsurprisingly, LFI was the main beneficiary of this electoral alliance. LFI had seventy-nine MPs (up from seventeen in 2017), the PS had twenty-eight (down from thirty-one), PCF had twenty-two

(up from sixteen) and EELV had twenty-three (up from zero).

NUPES represented a major tactical change for Mélenchon who, between 2016 and 2020, deliberately scorned the left and embraced a 'populist' strategy.¹⁴ He unsuccessfully tried to federate the 'people' beyond the traditional left-right divide. This did not go to plan: during Macron's first term, LFI did not fare well in the ballot box and the movement only managed to get a few candidates elected across France.

Mélenchon badly needed the launch of NUPES to avoid being soundly defeated again by Macron's party in the legislative elections (in 2017, LFI only secured the election of seventeen MPs against 267 MPs belonging to Macron's party). Yet, the other left-wing parties were also looking for an alliance that would enable them to salvage their parliamentary group. The PS, PCF and EELV fared so abysmally in the presidential election that—without such an agreement—they could have lost most of their parliamentary representation. The alliance marginally boosted the ailing fortunes of the PS, which had been fighting for its survival. However, the NUPES agreement gave the PS a chance to shift to the left and somewhat reconnect with its lost electorate.

NUPES had 151 MPs altogether, but it did not form a parliamentary group. Once elected, the left-wing MPs joined their respective party groups. Thus, with seventy-nine MPs, LFI was only the third parliamentary group behind *Renaissance* (Macron's party, with 169 MPs) and Le Pen's RN (eighty-eight MPs). With twenty-eight MPs, the PS was only the sixth largest parliamentary group. This reflects the current weakness of the left. One should not lose sight of the fact that the total left-wing vote in France sat at around 30 per cent at the end of Macron's first term. In comparison, right-wing and far-right votes totalled more than 60 per cent. This shows that there is no outright left-wing majority in France at present and it provided reason to temper expectations about what NUPES could achieve.

¹²M. Thépot, '1972–1981–2022: le "programme commun" de la NUPES n'est pas aussi à gauche que les précédents', *Marianne*, 20 May 2022; <https://www.marianne.net/politique/gauche/1972-1981-1997-le-programme-commun-de-la-nupes-nest-pas-aussi-a-gauche-que-les-precedents>

¹³T. Piketty, 'Thomas Piketty: "L'accord conclu par les partis de gauche marque le retour de la justice sociale et fiscale"', *Le Monde*, 7 May 2022; https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2022/05/07/thomas-piketty-le-programme-adopte-par-les-partis-de-gauche-marque-le-retour-de-la-justice-sociale-et-fiscale_6125101_3232.html

¹⁴P. Marlière, 'Jean-Luc Mélenchon and France Insoumise: the manufacturing of populism', in G. Katsambekis and A. Kioupkiolis, eds., *The Populist Radical Left in Europe*, London, Routledge, 2019, pp. 93–112.

The PS was in a most unusual—and, some would say, uncomfortable—position in many respects. It was part of an alliance under the leadership of LFI, a left populist movement. This was indeed a unique situation in the European left at large. Jean-Luc Mélenchon's abrasive style and his unwillingness to compromise with allies and adversaries were problematic for many socialists. LFI's Eurosceptic stance and Mélenchon's initial support of dictatorial regimes—the Chávez regime in Venezuela, China against Taiwan's independence, Putin's Russia against NATO and the USA, the list goes on—convinced many socialists that the PS and LFI are miles apart when it comes to questions of human rights and of self-determination.

According to a study by the Jean Jaurès Foundation (a think tank close to the PS), socialist sympathisers are more left-wing than the national average on socioeconomic issues (taxation of the rich, state intervention, workers' rights) as well as on environmental and societal issues (pro-immigration and pro-surrogacy rights for same-sex parents).¹⁵ They remain more supportive of European integration than the national average and they consider that globalisation to be an opportunity for France. A majority of socialist voters think that LFI is a party which 'stirs up violence' (56 per cent) and is 'dangerous for democracy' (51 per cent). They also disapprove of LFI's die-hard attitude in the National Assembly in opposition to Macron's majority.

These results underlined a deep schism within NUPES. Socialist voters do not regard LFI as a natural partner. They even point to the 'dangerousness' of Mélenchon's movement. In the aftermath of the murder of a young black person by the police in Nanterre in June 2003, riots erupted across France. Mélenchon and LFI, together with some EELV officials, vehemently criticised police brutality and the police's racial profiling of youngsters from ethnic minorities. The PS and PCF refused to join them and publicly condemned LFI for refusing to appeal for calm following violence on the streets and looting. This is just one of the many examples of conflict amongst

NUPES partners (others include the Russian war against Ukraine, European integration, LFI's 'radicality strategy' in opposition to Macron or the electoral bargaining before each election). Each new dispute brought the breakup of NUPES closer.

In fact, the NUPES coalition had been floundering since its inception. The left-wing partners did not trust each other and could not find a way to work together. Above all, LFI's junior partners feared Mélenchon's hegemonic ambitions. It is no surprise that the coalition unravelled in relation to another international issue: following Hamas's terror attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023, LFI acknowledged that 'war crimes may have been committed' but refused to label Hamas a terrorist organisation.

On 17 October, the PS's national council decided—with 54.15 per cent of the vote—on a 'moratorium on its participation in the NUPES' and denounced LFI's persistent conflictual nature. Mélenchon made the end of NUPES official on X, by commenting that 'Olivier Faure—PS's leader—breaks off from NUPES for personal reasons concerning Israel-Palestine.' Addressing his comrades, Faure argued that 'Jean-Luc Mélenchon has been a unifying factor, but today he has become an obstacle.' He stressed 'the need for a radical change' in the way a left-wing coalition works, hinting at more orderly and democratic relations with other left parties. The former Green presidential candidate, Yannick Jadot, called for a suspension of his party from the coalition 'until there is a strong clarification on core values.' The communists noted the 'impasse' within NUPES and called for 'a new type of union'.

All in all, NUPES unity was constantly tested and on the brink through various episodes: the domestic violence scandal involving Adrien Quatennens, an LFI MP and once presented as Mélenchon's political heir, the strategy against president Macron's pension reform, the urban riots in the summer of 2023 and the war in Ukraine. Each time, LFI's uncompromising stand was at loggerheads with its coalition partners.

Conclusion

Much weakened by dramatic electoral losses in 2017, the PS has not regained the dominant

¹⁵A. Bristielle, 'Le Parti socialiste: À gauche, mais avec qui?', *Fondation Jean Jaurès*, 25 January 2023; <https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/le-parti-socialiste-a-gauche-mais-avec-qui/>

position it once enjoyed on the left or in the French party system since then. However, the socialists have reason to be confident, having recently bounced back from their disastrous 2022 presidential result. In June 2024, the PS list—led by Raphaël Glucksmann, who is not a socialist—finished with 13.8 per cent, more than doubling his 2019 performance when he won 6.19 per cent in the European parliamentary elections. Three weeks later, following Macron's decision to call a snap general election, PS candidates fared well. As part of a new left-wing coalition called New Popular Front, sixty-nine socialist MPs were elected versus thirty-one in 2022.

It remains to be seen whether the PS can be competitive again when it comes to the presidential election. It may still be a powerhouse in the local and regional echelons of French politics or in alliance with other left-wing parties, but this should also translate into influence and success at the national level. One may contend that voters trust experienced socialist mayors or regional councillors during a period of political realignment or instability. However, they no longer regard the PS as the main party of opposition at the national level. Evidence of this is that they emphatically rejected its last two presidential candidates. That being said, there is little reason why there should not be a revival.

Between 2017 and 2024, the PS existed between a rock and a hard place: on its left, it was dominated by Mélenchon's LFI; on its right, by Macron's *Renaissance* party. The success of both parties has a lot to do with the PS's own setbacks. LFI has attracted a significant fraction of former socialist voters who felt 'betrayed' by Hollande's shift to the right during his presidency. Macron's candidacy and election in 2017 was rendered possible by internal conflicts in the PS during Hollande's term. Those who felt that Hamon's candidacy was too left-wing, or who now regard an alliance with Mélenchon as 'illegitimate', found refuge in Macron's party.

The renewal of the PS will not only depend on further realignments to its left (LFI) and to its right (*Renaissance*). It will also be conditional on the PS's ability to form a new generation of officials who are media savvy and have a good command of their brief. Those qualities seem to be in short supply in the party at present. The main party officials (including Olivier Faure, the

leader) are untried and relatively unknown to the public. LFI's breakthroughs in the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections were down to Jean-Luc Mélenchon's oratory skills, his strong political convictions and an ability to engage the electorate at rallies, on television or on social media. In terms of public image, the PS must rebuild virtually everything from scratch.

Politically and programmatically, the PS will have to decide if it stands on the social democratic left, or if it is now a centre-left party which can form coalition governments with centre-right or liberal parties. The past few years have been full of under-investment and cuts to French public services. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, inequalities have increased and salaries are stagnant. Studies have shown that rightward economic movements of social democratic parties significantly reduce their support under higher levels of income inequalities, especially when they are combined with rightward socio-cultural movements, as is the case in France.¹⁶ They also demonstrate that there are no massive voter flows from social democratic parties to right-wing populists or far-right parties.¹⁷ Disenfranchised social democratic voters switch allegiance to green or populist left parties or to mainstream centre-right parties. They also abstain from voting. Again, the PS is a case in point.

In short, a social democratic party in France has a lot to do. Doing little or simply consolidating some of the past reforms of the right spectacularly backfired between 2012 and 2017. Hollande's presidency may be seen as the 'third way moment' for the PS. But the French version never lived up to the British one. Hollande came to power without Blair's powerful narrative and new ideas. He lacked the support of a united party and he did not enact the social reforms that New Labour was able to implement. In 2012, the economic situation was also less favourable for social

¹⁶M. Polacko, 'The rightward shift and electoral decline of social democratic parties under increasing inequality'. *West European Politics*, vol. 4, no. 45, 2022, pp. 665–692; P. Marlière, 'The "Islamogauchiste threat" as political nudge', *French Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, no. 34, 2023, pp. 234–249.

¹⁷S. Häusermann, H. Kitschelt, T. Abou-Chadi, et al., 'Transformation of the left: the myth of voter losses to the radical right', *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, January 2021; <https://polit-x.de/en/documents/5083382/>

democrats than it was in the late 1990s. Now is the time for reconstruction. The PS has hard choices to make to convince the electorate that it can be trusted again to enhance social justice and protect civil liberties in France.

Philippe Marlière has been a professor of French and European Politics at University College London since 1994. He was a Research Fellow at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) between 1989 and 1994.