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Royal is caught in the left's battle with modernity

The question being asked both inside and outside France is: is Ségolène Royal really the bearer of the left's renewal?

The Socialist party did not follow social democratic parties in Europe and modernise as people had hoped after its failure in 2002, when Lionel Jospin, then leader, was leapfrogged by extreme-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in the first round of the presidential election. The Socialist party never drew lessons from that defeat. The party is fragile and divided, avoiding controversial debates to maintain unity. Heterogeneous views coexist within it, from reformists to those who desire an alliance with the Trotskyist extreme left. But the problem lies much deeper. It is linked to the history of the party itself.

The Socialist party does not have a social democratic tradition. It never had a strong working-class base or a privileged relationship with trade unions. It is a party lacking in confidence, which compensates for these weaknesses with ideological fervour. It still believes that its main task is to relieve society from neoliberalism in the least neoliberal country in Europe. This has created a gap between its discourse and reality. The British Labour party experienced this situation prior to its renewal under Tony Blair.

The free market's role is one of the hardest questions to confront for the Socialist party, which inherits a tradition of state-centred economic policy. Protection of vulnerable groups is seen to be in the exclusive purview of state intervention. The party clings to its ideal of reducing the role of the market to the benefit of the state. The notion that the market can be a lever to reduce inequalities is largely ignored by the French left. Employment deregulation is rejected as a liberal policy, even as the current iniquitous system reinforces the division between labour-market "insiders" and "outsiders".

The proposal to raise the minimum

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wage reflected this culture within the left. The Socialists believe that increasing the minimum wage constitutes social justice, failing to notice that the higher it is raised, the harder it is for the outsiders to enter the labour market. Redistribution remains the mantra of the Socialist party. Incentives are regarded as too pro-market.

Ms Royal's ascendance occurred outside the Socialist party. She avoided internal debates but exploited public opinion to build support within the party. Her electoral campaign is symptomatic of the ambivalence felt by the party towards her candidacy. Ms Royal knows that to win she needs the party's support. But she is aware that she will fail if she identifies too closely with a party whose programme is an expression of leftwing conservatism. This programme is a relic of the 1960s that seeks only to raise benefits for the young, the elderly and students, without any policies to increase economic efficiency. Its agenda is one of redistribution through increased taxation.

To Ms Royal's credit she has managed, at least initially, to avoid the difficulties contained in the party programme. She knows that it lacks credibility and is distancing herself from it. By concentrating on social problems associated with youth delinquency and criminal justice, she has won the support of a number of centrist and even rightwing voters. On these topics, she has shown her Blairite inclinations.

This political innovation has not always extended to economic issues. Ms Royal lacks original ideas that would differentiate her from the old leftwing schemes without mimicking the right. Ms Royal also knows that the Socialist party no longer wants to allow her too much freedom with its programme. Therefore, her position on crucial issues such as labour market reform lacks definition. But if she chose a centre left leader as prime minister she may take a reformist turn.

If Ms Royal wins these elections she will enter complex negotiations with the party. She will seek less to modernise it than to use it as a source of political mobilisation. If she loses, it is likely that her party opponents will blame her for not being "leftwing enough". But it is also possible that some will question why this party has been defeated in one election after another on a traditional socialist platform.

Another defeat at the presidential election should facilitate modernisation. However, after its 2002 failure it was widely believed that the Socialist party had no option but to modernise. Its current programme and culture demonstrate the contrary.

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