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The left in France

Bon appétit, comrades!

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The mainstream left seems to be in trouble all over Europe. We look at the French Socialists and Germany's Social Democrats (see [article](#))



AFP

EVERY August, French Socialists take their light cotton shirts and endless squabbles to La Rochelle for a "summer school". This year's was a dismal spectacle, marked by vapid declarations and shabby manoeuvring. One participant even lamented that the best speech he heard during the event was Barack Obama's at the Democratic convention in Denver.

The Socialists will pick a new leader at a congress in November, when François Hollande steps down after 11 years in the job. The candidates who have put their names forward include Ségolène Royal, the losing presidential

candidate in 2007 and Mr Hollande's ex-partner, and Bertrand Delanoë, the mayor of Paris (above, right). But it is unlikely that a front-runner will emerge before the congress. Ms Royal, who is loathed by many of the old guard, hopes to lean on her regional base and popularity among new members. This was how she won the party primary to become the presidential candidate. Among left-leaning voters, she is still the favourite to fight the 2012 presidential election, according to a poll by TNS Sofres.

Yet the same poll suggests that Mr Delanoë would be the preferred choice to run the party. Fresh from re-election as mayor of Paris, Mr Delanoë is seen outside the capital as a "bobo", a bourgeois bohemian. The polls put him third choice as presidential candidate, after Ms Royal and the favourite, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who runs the International Monetary Fund. To confuse matters, Martine Aubry (also above), architect of the 35-hour week, made a comeback at La Rochelle. Supported by the party's public-sector backbone, she is allying with Laurent Fabius, a former prime minister, to appeal to the left.

The trouble for the Socialists is that whoever takes over in November will have only limited authority, because party members may well pick somebody else as their presidential candidate. Not only does this trap the party in continuing personality clashes; but also it means that the battle of ideas is never over. For a party that has lost three presidential elections in a row, and that sits well to the left of European Social Democrats, this is worrisome.

In truth, the Socialists cannot decide whether to tack further to the left, so as to squash the far-left parties (including a new party led by Olivier Besancenot, a postman-cum-politician who hopes to inherit the moribund Communist vote); or to shift to the centre to adapt to the realities of global capitalism. If anything, the left-leaning tendency is to the fore. When Manuel

Valls, a young mayor, suggested dropping the word "Socialist" from the party's name, he was derided. "I sometimes think that they prefer fighting over the choice of leader, because it is so much easier than agreeing on a doctrine," comments Dominique Reynié, a leading political scientist.

To some extent, the French Socialists' problems match those of the mainstream left across Europe. Last April's election of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy reduced to three—Britain, Portugal and Spain—the countries in the European Union run by a mainstream centre-left party on its own. Both the British and Spanish left are in trouble, grappling with an economic downturn and a property bust. Gordon Brown looks highly likely to lose the next British election to David Cameron's rejuvenated Conservatives. Germany's Social Democrats, who share power with the right, are fast losing both members and popularity.

In a recent paper for a British think-tank, Progress, Denis MacShane, a Labour member of parliament, argued that "the democratic left in Europe faces its gravest crisis in more than half a century." Yet only a decade ago, the left was in the ascendant and Europe's voters had sent the right into the wilderness. So why is the democratic left now in decline?

One cyclical explanation is that a period in opposition has helped the right to reinvent itself and shake off an image of out-datedness. The Moderates in Sweden spent 12 years in opposition before winning power in 2006, after Fredrik Reinfeldt, Sweden's young prime minister, transformed them into a modern, electable party. Britain's Conservatives needed a decade out of power to come to terms with the case for recasting themselves as a nicer party. Mr Cameron has ruthlessly appropriated themes—greenery, inequality—that once belonged to the left. Even France's Nicolas Sarkozy campaigned against the record of Jacques Chirac, his predecessor, and he also wrong-footed the left by borrowing both its talent—eg, Bernard Kouchner, his foreign minister—and its themes. He has put more minorities in government than the Socialists ever did.

Two structural reasons may also matter. One is the post-industrial decline of trade unions. This has robbed union-based parties of the left of their natural power base. It has also left them especially in hock to public-sector workers, who tend to be both removed from the globalised economy and hostile to reform. A second factor is Europe's ageing population. Older voters tend to be more conservative. They are also more worried about things like immigration, Islam and security, which the left often has hang-ups about but are favourite issues of the right.

But the biggest problem for Europe's mainstream left has been to face up to globalisation, a force it has spent much time denouncing. In this respect, Britain's Labour Party is arguably an exception (as, to a lesser extent, are Spain's Socialists). France's Socialists campaigned in the 2007 election for a big rise in the minimum wage and ending loopholes in the 35-hour week. That they lost suggests that, even in a country that professes itself hostile to global capitalism, voters seem to understand that policies to trammel it are in the long run self-destructive.

If they are not to be representatives only of a protected public sector, Europe's centre-left parties need more convincing responses to popular unease over globalisation, especially as the downturn bites and job losses accelerate. But as Mr MacShane points out in his paper, this will require "telling truth to power in the trade-union movement and to the power of old established special interests", and a reform of "the acquired rights of those in state employment who are protected from market pressures." Unreformed, Europe's old-style left risks turning into a permanent protest movement: capable of capturing the anti-incumbent vote at local and regional elections, as the French Socialists often do, but not of appealing more broadly to win power at national level.

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