



## A common house for the left: The French Socialist's 2012 vision

Martine Aubry's *gauche solidaire* coalition has the potential to bring the progressive left to power in France yet many daunting obstacles remain in place

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Eight years after the defeat of Lionel Jospin, the socialist leader who was stunningly overtaken by the far-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen in the first round of the 2002 presidential elections, the French left is hoping to finally banish its presidential election curse. In the recently fought regional elections of March 2010, the *gauche solidaire*, an alliance composed of the Socialist Party, Europe Ecology and the Left Front pulled together and triumphed in the second round with a 54.11 per cent share of the votes. The opposing coalition of the right led by the UMP came in a distant second with a 35.38 per cent showing.

Riding high on the results of the first round of the regional elections, the PS with a 29.14 per cent share of the votes emerged once again as France's leading political party. The Socialists under the aegis of their leader Martine Aubry are working with a new sense of vigour and now firmly believe that they can topple Nicolas Sarkozy, whose public opinion rating is plummeting, in the 2012 presidential elections.

Even if one takes into account the high level of abstention – 48.92 per cent on 21 March – it can be said that a replication of this support at the national elections would bring the Socialists to power with a large National Assembly majority.

Yet the electoral performances of the PS are somewhat paradoxical and nothing can be taken for granted. First and foremost, the cooperation and coalition building that brought success in the regional elections does not easily transfer to the national electoral landscape. The presidential system and the coming 2012 elections favour free-riding, making coalition-building more cumbersome. Moreover, the Socialist Party has become accustomed to winning mid-term elections – regional, municipal, cantonal and European – yet when it comes to general elections – presidential and parliamentary – they lose out.

Since 1988, when Francois Mitterrand was re-elected, the PS has failed in three successive presidential elections and in three general elections, with the notable exception of 1997 when it benefited from an unexpected dissolution of parliament by Jacques Chirac. Yet in contrast to its shortcomings at the national level, the Socialist Party plays a commanding role in local and regional governance. A third of the 200,000 party members are elected representatives with various official positions in the political and public administration. It is thus acknowledged that the PS is a good local authority manager, but that it struggles to translate its local competencies into national leadership. This is the fundamental challenge that they must now overcome.

Central to this challenge will be progress on three fronts which have handicapped the Socialist Party since Jospin's fall from grace in 2002: the absence of any meaningful alliances with a decaying and fractious left, a vacuum in its ideology and a lack of legitimate leadership.

### Progressive coalition building

The strategic architecture of the Socialist's national electoral campaign is closely linked to its plans for progressive coalition building across the left. Yet, a brief look back at the history of coalitions on the French left reveals that such aspirations can be rewarding or risky, but always difficult to endure.

On 27 June 1972 François Mitterrand, who one year previously had assumed leadership of a new socialist party at the Congress of Epinay, signed a “common platform for government” with the Communist Party and the Left Radicals. At the time the French Communist Party was almighty, and Mitterrand’s overtures were seen as an audacious gamble. Yet Mitterrand persevered arguing to the Socialist International that he could “rebuild a grand Socialist Party on the very field occupied by the Communist party”. “Of the five million communist voters, three million can vote socialist,” he maintained.

In 1981 when Mitterrand was elected president of the French Republic, he won his bet. The Communist Party was on the wane and the Socialist Party dominated the left. Coalition-building had proved instrumental in bringing to power the first PS president under the institutional framework of the fifth republic. Yet, the coalition experiment collapsed in 1984.

In 1997, Lionel Jospin was dealt a different set of cards when he hastily built the “plural left” (“gauche plurielle”) in the wake of an unexpected dissolution of Parliament. The alliance built by the PS was made up of five elements: the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Citizens Movement (“Mouvement des Citoyens”) of Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the Left Radicals and the Greens. This coalition experiment lasted until the end of the five-year term but it again collapsed on 21 April 2002 when each element of the “plural left” put forward its own candidate for the presidential election. We know how the story ends... the leader of the far-right Jean-Marie Le Pen secured more votes than the socialist candidate in the 1st round of the presidential election, in no small part due to electoral fragmentation and factionalisation on the left.

Nevertheless, since Martine Aubry assumed party leadership she has made a firm commitment to build a “common house for the left” (“maison commune de la gauche”). Aubry’s aim is to strike a “new deal” that will take the coalition into the 2012 presidential elections and beyond and in the process prove that it is more resilient than previous coalitions.

After the March regional elections she moved quickly to shore up deals with the *gauche solidaire* alliance and to improve relations with Europe Ecologie, who with a 12.19 per cent share of the national electorate, is now France’s third political force, and thus her privileged partner.

Yet, how fragile are the foundations on which *gauche solidaire* are based? The Europe Ecologie movement is in itself quite a fragmented conglomeration which unites the Greens, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and other civil society personalities, friends of the green activist Nicolas Hulot and even Greenpeace. Therefore, if Aubry’s dream is to be realised, Europe Ecologie will need a sounder structure and will have to do away with the internal squabbling which the Greens in particular are inclined to engage in. For example, the Greens led by Cécile Duflot, are determined to unite the ecology movement and have vowed to fight tooth and nail for their autonomy, yet Daniel Cohn-Bendit wants to establish a privileged partnership with the Socialist Party. He is ready to participate in the socialist primaries and has agreed to a common candidate for the 2012 presidential election as a part of a deal where the socialists would reserve his party winnable constituencies during the general election due to follow on the presidential election in May 2012. Likewise the Left Front has its own internal horse trading dilemmas to deal with which will require careful handling.

The potential for fragmentation is therefore very high. If the *gauche solidaire* is to stand the test of time, decisive and pragmatic leadership will be needed by all parties to the deal. Europe Ecologie has made an encouraging step in this direction by vowing to settle their strategic differences at a national conference at the end of the year dedicated to building “the green house” (will it be open or closed?).

## Closing the ideological vacuum and overcoming the war of egos

The two other major hurdles facing the French Socialist party in their quest for renewal are ideology and leadership. The new socialist programme is a work in progress. On 29 May a PS national convention will spell out “a new economic, social and ecological model” for the French Republic. Underpinning this programme is Martine Aubry’s aim to radically reform 21st Century social democracy through the reinvention of a new social contract around the triptych of “capital, labour and nature”.

Since her election as leader of the party the PS has made a concerted effort to define itself as a “reformist party” with a “vision for radical social transformation”. Aubry is determined to cultivate a “society of care”, referring to the English dictum, where “society takes care of you, but you have to take care of others and the society” and to marry this compassionate strain of reformism to a radical agenda of societal change.

The PS argues that they don’t want to adapt the present system but rather to change it and “build a new project to transform society”. However, there may prove to be a significant gap between rhetoric and reality. If they come back to power, the PS will be confronted with a huge level of public debt and will be obliged to implement what it calls the “necessary cuts in public spending”. How will it combine compassionate reformism, radical reformism and the economic reforms imposed by austerity measures? This is a clear electoral stumbling block and it is thus apparent that Aubry will have to establish a credible and sound narrative on this sooner rather than later.

Overcoming fractious competition between its different leaders is the third challenge that the socialist party needs to overcome. In 2004, the PS won a threefold victory in the regional, cantonal and European elections, offering much promise for a successful run in the 2007 presidential elections. Yet, the left tore itself apart during the referendum on the European constitutional treaty in 2005 when supporters and opponents of its ratification clashed. Ségolène Royal was then defeated two years later by Nicolas Sarkozy.

This time, the PS has made a firm commitment to shake free from its old demons – first and foremost the “war of egos” between its leaders which has consistently undermined its appeal – and to learn the lessons of past failures. It now considers itself armed with the necessary tools, leader, programme and alliance to succeed in the presidential elections. Martine Aubry, on the back of the regional election success, has confirmed her once highly contested leadership of the PS. The Democratic Movement (MoDem) of Francois Bayrou on the centre-right and the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) of Olivier Besancenot on the far-left have been crushed, meaning Aubry has also earned her title of leader of the opposition.

Yet at the same time, her current dominance of the left is creating suspicion on the part of both coalition partners and individuals within the socialist movement who also harbour presidential ambitions.

The new system of presidential primaries, introduced in order to reach beyond traditional socialist constituencies and add an “Obama” style dynamic to the political selection process, therefore might well reignite the infamous “war of the lords” which has dogged the French left during previous campaigns. Will a consensus be reached or will the different power bases and interests clash?

The procedure for selecting candidates in the primaries – based on the Italian system whereby voting is open not just to constituency party members, but to anyone sympathetic to the left who is willing to pay the registration fee – will be instrumental in selecting the socialist contender for the Presidential election. Aubry is behaving more and more like a potential presidential candidate and her position as first secretary of the Socialist Party unavoidably gives her the edge. Dominique Strauss-Khan whose term as director general of the IMF ends in November 2012 – after the presidential election – is ahead in the polls but is doing his best to shroud his intentions in mystery. Ségolène Royal is not yet a candidate,

but if her profile rises again, she might be tempted. It is also likely that François Hollande, who led the PS between 1997 and 2008, will compete.

The spectre of clashing egos and damaging infighting remains.

The *gauche solidaire* is thus under construction. Coalition-building and overcoming factionalisation will be at the core of any winning strategies for the French left. If the different architects and leaders involved succeed in getting along, the left will consolidate itself and new prospects will open up. But from now until 2012, the experiment will represent a long journey during which Martine Aubry's national leadership skills will be put to numerous tests.

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