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Dissecting French Schizophrenia

The lost children of Bastiat have traded a monarchy for a union-made straitjacket.

BY RACHEL MARSDEN

French strikes have been a weekly ritual since the beginning of the summer. Finally, the country's crippling protests are expected to die down now that Paris has passed its pension reforms to bump the legal retirement age to 62 from 60.

The view from France? Polls indicate that the end of the strikes will leave the French simultaneously enraged and pleased. Opinionway finds that 56% of French people oppose continuing the strikes after the legislation has passed. And while Ifop says that 59% of respondents considered it unacceptable for the strikes to block fuel depots or roads, it also notes that 63% supported this week's strikes. Approval for the strikers rose to 71% in a recent CSA survey.

Normally, this would be the cue to sigh "ah, France" and turn our minds to less frustrating quandaries. But these are not normal times, and the Gallic political psyche has left the rest of the West puzzled not only as to why so much fuss over two measly working years, but whether France is reformable, and hence governable, at all.

So how can the French simultaneously back the strikes and hope for their end? The math that supports President Nicolas Sarkozy's reforms is self-explanatory: France cannot continue to devote 29.2% of its GDP to social-security spending (second only to Sweden within the OECD) with its current rate of growth of just 0.3%. Economic growth needs to accelerate and entitlements need to shrink. Each goal supports the other.

But the French people's understanding of this relationship between productivity and prosperity is in constant battle with their historic affinity for rebellion. The French support striking because it's part of their national brand; they see their nation as successful

because of this tradition, not in spite of it.

France's strikes today are fueled by a fond cultural memory of the National Assembly voting to behead King Louis XVI after the "sans culottes" threatened to take him and his allies out themselves. In France, uprisings have worked, and whatever the malady in question, a re-enactment of the French Revolution always seems like a plausible solution to some.

The difference today is that Nicolas Sarkozy isn't a monarch—the "illegitimate child of [his predecessor] Jacques Chirac"—as he once joked when confronted with the idea. The majority of the French who oppose letting the 2010 strikes grind France to a halt understand that it's one thing to protest against a policy, but quite another for a minority of citizens, backed by an opposition Socialist Party, to hold an entire economy hostage. Tradition and symbolism are important, but today the rule of law is paramount in France.

That fact, combined with France's economic realities, should have been enough to secure majority support for Mr. Sarkozy's reforms. The reason it's not is that while many if not most French people realize that striking is not particularly helpful, they've yet to connect how the strikers' endless demands, and the government's correlated overregulation and taxation, ultimately harm regular working Frenchmen and women.

The president has nobody but himself to blame for this problem. While the protests oppose the letter and spirit of his reforms, Mr. Sarkozy has yet to make clear that his reforms are designed to oppose the letter and spirit of the protests. So far Mr. Sarkozy's case has vacillated between threats against the opponents of his reforms and sugar-coated talk of "solidarity" that's intended

to mask the measures' intent. The result is public schizophrenia over one of the least consequential economic reforms the developed world has ever seen.

With his own approval rating down to 29%, Mr. Sarkozy has 18 months left until he is up for re-election. His only chance at a second term is to start explaining, every day until he's sick and bored of himself, how the economic growth currently being blocked by the strikes will hurt the French people's own finances or even jobs.

Were Mr. Sarkozy to show these lost children of Frédéric Bastiat that they have traded a monarchy for a union-made straitjacket, he might have achieved much deeper reforms than a two-year extension of French workers' productive years. And if he were truly as laissez faire as he's accused of being, he wouldn't have merely delayed the legal retirement age by two years—he would have taken the government out of the pension management business altogether: Keep your money, retire when you want, but don't look to us if you mismanage your new freedom.

The lesson for the rest of us is that when rioters are on the streets, no political cognitive dissonance is allowed.

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