

OLBERT'S GHOST

An Exception Amid Success Stories

France's liberal hope wants to break with the 'tyranny of the status quo.'

BY ALAIN MADELIN

L'exception française is always a winner in my country, just as any mention of American exceptionalism is in the United States. But these days France has become exceptional in a number of areas by stubbornly remaining behind while other great nations, especially here in Europe, have forged forward. In order for us to recover our position in the world, we have to give the French the freedom to realize their dreams.

We have remained a centralized state where government retains overwhelming power because of certain features of our history. The Jacobin legacy of the French Revolution, with its suppression of bourgeois civil society, played a part, as did the earlier economic policies of Jean Baptiste Colbert, which were a precursor to the welfare state.

Instead of breaking with those obsolete and ruinous practices, successive right- and left-wing governments have continuously raised taxes and multiplied regulation, practices that served their interests if not those of the French. As other European countries cut taxes and red tape, France has become more and more isolated. It has lost competitiveness: businesses and investors no longer come here; capital and our most talented young brains flee our shores.

I want to change this status quo, break this inertia, end this dirigisme and pull France up to the level of global competition and into line with free Europe. As Jose Maria Aznar, Spain's successful prime minister, has recalled, the European project is a classical liberal one, and it is going back to its roots. Spain, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Ireland and of course the U.K. have adopted new policies, built upon free enterprise, free trade and free markets, that are making their societies thrive.

'Tyranny of the Status Quo'

Unfortunately, the French have never been given such a political opportunity. No party, no leader dares to tell the truth and to put forward the necessary reforms. Politicians are paralyzed in front of unions, lobbies and leftist media. We are faced with the "tyranny of the status quo."

Thus my candidacy gives the French a choice they've never had, a platform that calls for reforms along the lines of those offered by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. I want to introduce complete privatizations, tax cuts, deregulation and

more-flexible labor and capital markets.

Privatizations are a priority as the French government still owns too many companies, which benefit from monopoly positions despite European rules. Those privatizations will enable us to reduce government spending and thus our national debt.

Tax cuts of course are essential in a country that holds several records, all of them in areas we'd rather not be leading



Jean Baptiste Colbert

in: the highest tax and social security contributions in Europe, plus earlier phase-ins of those high levels. Corporate profits, the incomes of talented entrepreneurs, savings and wealth are particularly penalized. But the only way to give people the incentive to become entrepreneurs, to save, and to work more is to give them back the money they have earned through their hard work. That is the only way we are ever going to realize full employment.

We need to liberalize the job market by eliminating the government-created rigidities that discourage the hiring of new workers and the development of the enterprise in general. Only in this way can we profit from all the skills and human energy that abound in France but that are now being suppressed. We must get rid of the clamp on growth that is the mandatory 35-hour

workweek introduced by the current Socialist-Communist government. This is a prime example of a French exception nobody needs. Each and every person should be able to work as long as he or she wants.

Clearly we need a new political arrangement. The needed retreat from statism in the economic and social fields must of course be accompanied by the restoration of the essential functions of the state. For, paradoxically, as government's involvement in the economy has grown, its legitimate presence in safeguarding security and justice has been diminished. Our diplomatic ties, another legitimate function of the state, have also suffered under the Socialists' maladroit direction.

Penchant for Freedom

The French are longing for these reforms, for a return to both freedom and sense of security. Both have been trampled by the left and promised—but never delivered—by the right. Our leaders for too long seemed to have ignored our compatriots' penchant for initiative and freedom. But once freed, the French would be able to take up the challenge of globalization and be able to fit in a redesigned Europe.

Evidence that this is the case can be found in the success that the French have abroad and in the vigor of French small businesses, which because they are often able to fly under the government's radar screen manage to create jobs and services domestically. France now is like a barren land dried up by the lord's *corvees* and plunders, but on which clever serfs work hard with obstinacy and courage. How great the harvest could be if only the peasants were all of a sudden freed from those who harass and exploit them, if the land could be irrigated by commerce and enriched by saving!

I am furious today when I see so many efforts wasted, so many youngsters sacrificed and so many entrepreneurs penalized. I am furious at seeing France lose all credit in the world arena because it prefers to join the supporters of antiglobalization, to sell weapons to Angola and to other dictatorships around the globe and to stupidly make a diplomatic row over so-called "American unilateralism." Only a France that is freed, democratic, and based on human rights can bring its dynamism, its creativity and its generosity to the whole world.

Mr. Madelin is the leader of Democratie Libérale and a candidate for president of France.