

France gives the EU a breather

The nightmare scenario in Brussels would have been a le Pen/Mélenchon run off in the second and final round of the French Presidential election. Both candidates, for different reasons, were strongly EU-critical and the far left Jean-Luc Mélenchon put in a strong showing in the final days of campaigning.

Not strong enough, however, to beat Emmanuel Macron, the most pro-EU candidate of the four front runners. He will go forward to the second round where he is widely expected to win comfortably against Marine le Pen, although probably not by anything like the same margin as the 82%-18% victory of Jacques Chirac over her father Jean-Marie le Pen in 2002

One reason why a Macron victory is unlikely to be that decisive is that he has come out openly in support not only of the EU but of multiculturalism and diversity. France today contains a substantial number of voters who are distinctly unenthusiastic about both. Indeed, a total of 46% of all votes were cast for either le Pen, Mélenchon or "Frexit" candidate Nicolas Dupont-Aignan. Abstention is likely to be high in the second round and some supporters of the defeated candidates may well switch to Marine le Pen. Even so, it would be a brave man who would bet any money on her becoming president this time round.

So huge sighs of relief are the order of the day in Brussels and Berlin. What about in London? A run-off between two EU-critical candidates with one of them eventually becoming president would have perhaps given us a Brexit-friendly voice in the Elysée Palace but at the expense of the remaining EU-26 wanting to take a tougher line on Brexit to minimise the risk of contagion. A probable Macron victory relieves the fear of

any other country voting to leave. As with the failure of Geert Wilders' PVV Party to top the polls in the Netherlands' election earlier this year, Brexit now looks more and more like a one-off as far as the EU is concerned.

But those disaffected 46% will be heading back to the polls in June to vote in elections of the National Assembly, the lower house of the French Parliament. Even if France ends up with a pro-EU president, that president is likely to deal with a considerable number of *députés* who do not share his enthusiasm. As in other European countries, support for the mainstream socialist party is in freefall and the centre-right *Les Républicains* are unlikely to perform well. This doesn't mean that the EU's day of reckoning has only been postponed by a further two months. Its final collapse could be several years away, but as one Old Testament prophet put it, ***"The vision is yet for an appointed time... thought it tarry, wait for it, because it will surely come."***