

WHAT SHOULDN'T BE DONE?

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This question was asked in relation to a political platform for France. We are not convinced it is a pertinent question, if a platform means a long list of totally unconnected measures that candidates promise to carry out if they are elected. The list is usually very dense and ill-assorted, because it is mainly aimed at satisfying the various categories whose votes these candidates are trying to catch. It has to include the farmers and the overseas territories, the pensioners and the young people, the tenants and the landlords, the SMEs and the artisans, the suburbs and the city centres. In France, a platform is often a series of claims aimed at different categories of the population, with a few guiding principles thrown in for good measure. Since standing for election basically means seeking legislative and regulatory power, the platform primarily consists of promises of new laws and new regulations, in addition to promises to change and even do away with the existing laws and regulations. Voters have certain expectations of their future head of State so candidates have to come with their hands full, even though we should know by now they don't have much to offer!

The election "platform" is an excellent illustration of the "capture" of the State which, under the guise of overtly and officially acting in the public interest, defends the existence of an existing "rent" or permits the creation of a new one. "Rent" should be taken here in the broad sense of the term. It may be a subsidy or special taxation treatment, a source of revenue, a status or even a recognition. When the "electoral promise" is defined by the candidate and their party, it determines who will be doing the capturing. But the process of trying to meet the demands of different categories of the population, and making electoral promises of every kind imaginable, does not work towards the public interest. Quite the contrary.

The much-vaunted electoral promises

When you take a closer look, all the electoral promises are geared towards new expenditure rather than reducing existing public spending. And trying to put a figure on the various measures is at best approximate and, at worst, impossible. In the first instance, they are to be funded by raising tax and social security deductions and, as a last resort, by increasing the public deficit, which is exactly what has been happening in France since

the 1970s. In a campaign process in which there is a lot of haggling over financial backing, everyone thinks they are getting their proper share, but the final result never adds up. The staggering growth of the national debt is the most blatant symptom of the French democratic crisis. In the system as it stands, future generations will be paying for treaties signed on their behalf – and in which they had no say - to satisfy the immediate demands of existing generations. Because in the end, only the State can continually clock up debt without having to worry about who is going to pay for it. It is simply left up to the generations of the future. Yet the French Civil Code says that no one can leave their debts to their descendants. Individual wisdom, collective irrationality.

The notion of public interest, which keeps popping up everywhere, has lost all meaning, mainly because it is a concept that is closely associated with the State. Perhaps it would be better to talk of the common good, which has a broader meaning, and brings everything together in a search for harmony. Common good, rather than public interest, includes both political society and civil society. It refers to a heritage that belongs to us all, which is multi-dimensional, multi-cultural and multi-historical, both tangible and intangible, a sharing of common values.

Short-termism, the State's greatest defect

This major political problem of modern democracies has been clearly identified. The State, whose control is the very essence of elections, is riddled with incompetence and short-termism, with a marked preference for the present. This is the result of the great reversal that took place in the twentieth century when deficit financing was seen as a way of alleviating unemployment and rebuilding the economy. To quote Keynes, “in the long term, we are all dead”. That, however, is not true when you stop reasoning on an individual level and start adopting a multi-generational logic. As the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises pointed out, burning your furniture is not the best way to heat your home. In the long term, there will always be a new short term! Traditionally, the long view was always the province of the State, as opposed to private stakeholders and impatient, short-sighted markets. But that situation has been reversed. The State always seems to act on a day-to-day or a month-to-month basis. Because it does not anticipate necessary adaptations, it reacts in a panic, with one crisis plan after another, always making the best of a bad choice.

The State is presented with immediate, urgent demands, which lead to immediate, urgent responses. The State allocates new budgets like a

fireman doing his best to stop the fire spreading further. It makes most of its decisions with its hands bound. Future generations are not - or very poorly - represented in the contemporary electoral process. The classic election platform only heightens this “here and now imperialism”. And since the public mistrust of politics seems to be constantly growing, we have learnt to distrust promises and want to see immediate results. We can also say, like those little signs put up in cafés with too many unpaid bills, “No credit given” meaning, of course, to politicians. It was after all a French politician who popularised the expression that promises are only binding on those who believe in them.

The means or the end?

On a more fundamental level, the election platform has an undeniable bias. Instead of proposing a vision of society, of its challenges, its risks and its future, it focuses only on means. Instead of giving a vision of the global adaptation of society to an ageing population and a situation in which four generations co-exist - unprecedented in the history of humanity - we just worry about the retirement age or increasing the pension – a somewhat narrow view of things. Rather than proposing a vision of society transformed by the development of new technologies affecting every walk of life, we talk about the legal working week and the payment of overtime. Rather than imagining how to enter the new knowledge society, which is a major issue for the future of our country, we talk about recruiting teaching staff. Rather than proposing a project where science and technology are vectors for new development, we promise a fuzzily defined universal income, which is a weapon of mass destruction pointed at the value of labour. Rather than rethinking the place of our country in a world subjected to dangerous entropic forces, we find obvious scapegoats, responsible for every evil: Europe, globalisation, free trade.

The French-style election platform, which is nothing more than a catalogue of administrative measures, gives no *meaning* to our destiny. It does not give us a *history*, a *story* we can write together, a guideline that will direct the government’s action, a direction that will show the coherence of the actions to be taken.

The main drawback of the election platform is that it offers no motivation to civil society, but puts the accent on the State as the main, and even the sole, agent. What we have is a star-shaped society whose centre is the State, the circle of circles, as Hegel called it. Civil society disappears during the campaign, eclipsed by State society. Obsessed by State power,

civil society melts into the background and its different elements try to attract the attention of the State to get whatever sinecures it can.

Remember what Sartre said through the mouth of Zeus: “For a hundred thousand years I have been dancing a slow, dark ritual dance before men's eyes. Their eyes are so intent on me that they forget to look into themselves.”¹ The election platform in France is a dance performed by the State ... which fascinates our fellow citizens.

This situation is accentuated in France with respect to other countries, due to the number of civil servants in the political arena. There is no point in holding forth on the subject. The situation is well-known but the French tradition - which gives the monopoly on public interest to the State, with its “servants” or “senior civil servants” as its custodians - is disastrous.

To get out of the rut in which France has been stuck for many long decades, we do not need an umpteenth platform, but a vision, which can only happen if civil society is revitalised. This vision - in the sense of *Weltanschauung* - must be holistic. It must try to show our fellow citizens how the world is evolving in all its dimensions, and how the role and place of our country in the world is also evolving.

The real issue? Devolution

The State must relinquish some of its powers by devolution to civil society, in a large number of areas. The words decentralisation and deconcentration are hackneyed. Devolution is what we need; like a donation, it is never reversible. It is by breathing new life into civil society that we will find a more balanced democracy, which does not revolve around the State. Achieving this end means reducing not only tax and social security deductions but also public and welfare expenditure. These reductions are a *means* and not an end! Having an extensive civil society - which is the real objective - means less State intervention.

The same is true for the *normative* framework of civil society. The State's distrust in this regard ultimately explains why it spends its time trying to control and supervise civil society, bending it to its will and treating it like a child. To re-motivate civil society – in order to restart the entire country - those who want to exercise State power - be at the *Head* of it - will have to demonstrate their confidence in all the stakeholders of civil society.

¹Jean Paul Sartre, *The Flies*, translated from the French by Stuart Gilbert, from “No Exit and Three Other Plays”, Vintage, 1989.

Take the following example. By reforming the labour code in the French politico-bureaucratic tradition, the State can pass new legislation on working time. The reform will be either positive - working time will be extended - or disastrous - working time will be reduced. In both cases, the debate will be political, because it will be decided by a parliamentary vote. If, on the other hand, the principle of devolution is applied, the State will not make a decision about working time but instead will send the question back to the employee and employer representatives, in the corporate world, who will of course have to respect the imperatives of social public policy (child labour and so on). And social public policy exists on a European level. Through this devolution, priority is given to employment contracts and sector-based agreements rather than to laws and regulations. The question is depoliticized and empowerment conferred upon the people directly concerned. The State relinquishes part of the power it has monopolised and transfers it to the stakeholders of civil society.

These devolutions concern many other fields and institutions, especially the regional authorities and agencies responsible for special missions, which have effective moral, political and financial autonomy.

Should power be won so it can be transferred?

What a dilemma! To conquer the State – to obtain State power at great cost – only to reduce it and relinquish part of its prerogatives, to reduce the means at its disposal, to decrease the privileges to which it is entitled! State reform – in the sense of public administrations - is the alpha and omega of this historical rebalancing of public Society and civil Society. We need to elect a head of State reform, rather than a head of State whose mission would be to redistribute the power conferred upon him or her by direct universal suffrage.

Resistance to this vast and ambitious redistribution of power will come from those who live in the public sphere. Whence the importance of “State capture” to those who make their living from it. The public world is full of statue-like statutes – effigies set in stone that protect its members. And many of the provisions concerning the public sector derogate from ordinary law. This is certainly the case for pension schemes, for example, as well as health funds and working time. Aligning public and private schemes will not only have positive consequences for the budget; it will

also have major political repercussions, namely the banalisation of the State and the end of its privileges.

Of course, vision is not enough to find a new destiny and plan. Steadfast determination is also needed to transform the country; it will meet with enormous resistance from conservatives on both the left and right, who see order in today's disorder and want to protect their "rents", however small these may be. What we need are deeply rooted values.

Power or authority?

The main quality of a man or a woman called upon to exercise lofty responsibilities, in this case, those of the head of State, is to be an authority and/or to have authority. Elections provide access to State power, which means having recourse to legitimate violence. Elections do not confer authority as such on the person who comes to power. Authority means driving others without resorting to violence, whether physical, moral or symbolic. The political situation in many modern societies corresponds to too much power and too little authority. It is always authority rather than power that leads to a better respect of civil society. It is authority which is inherently the most respectful of freedom. And to have authority, strong values must be embodied and respected.

Is this just another election platform? No, we need strong ambition to transform our country through the empowerment of civil society, which is in the best position to make the necessary adaptations at the right time. Tocqueville, come back, they have gone crazy!