

another country



The implications and eventual form of so-called UK 'Brexit' from the EU continue to dominate the political agenda and the headlines. Yet as inflation climbs¹ and the UK falls to the bottom of the economic growth tables in the EU and G7,² there is still precious little for those in planning and related fields to go on when appraising the potential impacts on their work of an ongoing period of uncertainty unprecedented in recent British history.

With so much still up in the air, it is little wonder that many working in planning and related disciplines seem to be hunkering down and trying to get on with their day jobs – or perhaps for many in the public sector that should read 'get on with their day job as best they can, given the scale of cuts to local budgets and teams over recent years'?

On the legislative and policy front the continuing lack of specification of what kind of relationship the UK will have in future with the EU also means that 12 months after the EU referendum there is still little clarity. Actors across a range of fields in planning, development and environmental policy are therefore still very much reading the runes in terms of the implications for their sectors.³

Being a professional in 'Brexit Britain' requires further attention to sustain professional values and integrity, and vigilance around the potential of being drawn into apologism for, abnegation in the face of, or collaboration with political agendas that grate with planning's progressive vocation.⁴

Given the picture sketched above – partly in weariness(!), but also in a spirit of overcoming the solipsism and insularity that contributed to getting the UK into its present predicament – this instalment of 'Europe Inside Out' turns its attention to developments elsewhere in Britain's home continent.

More specifically, it considers some of the potential consequences for territorial and planning issues of the recent elections in France.

The place of 'the urban' in the 2017 French presidential campaign

The French presidential campaign of spring 2017 was not marked by a strong emphasis on 'the city', or urban futures. This seems to have been for a number of reasons.

First, as a presidential election it was largely fought around overarching political principles and orientations, with a focus on the national level and the wider 'future of France'.⁵ It is interesting that in the EU referendum debate in 2016 in the UK the diverse territorial interests of places similarly did not really focus much in a debate quite myopically focused on a notional and monolithic 'national interest'. In the French presidential election the four most popular candidates, François Fillon, Emmanuel Macron, Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, were mostly distinguished by their stances on quite a limited range of key issues, such as their position on the EU and the cultural diversity of the country. Although for planners and others in related disciplines many of these issues may have self-evident spatial dimensions, in the campaign territorial and urban questions were less central in the positioning of the candidates than the wider issues.

Secondly, the disciplinary backgrounds of the candidates, who mainly had a legal, administrative and economic background and culture, also played a role. None had a background in any of the spatial disciplines, or had been particularly invested previously in planning issues – either as an elected representative or an activist.

Thirdly, journalists tended to call on academics and commentators with a background in economics to discuss policy issues during the campaign. This contributed to raising the prominence of economic concerns, although these were clearly central anyway, given issues such as the stubbornly high levels of employment which had marked the quinquennium of the outgoing president, François Hollande.

Different ways of being territorial

On a wider front, however, the campaign was marked by a discussion of territorial issues.⁵ For example, all the candidates talked about rural and peri-urban spaces. France's character as a relatively low-density country partly explains this, as in such a

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Supporters celebrating Emmanuel Macron's victory outside the Louvre in May

setting the question of the countryside and rural areas is ever present in the national conversation. In historical terms the notion of the territory of the nation and the interrelation and integration of its constituent parts has been prominent since at least the 1940s, which saw the publication of Jean-François Gravier's *Paris et le désert français*, and it was later officially and linguistically enshrined in the concept and policy of *aménagement du territoire*. A major historical work edited by Pierre Nora in the 1990s⁶ on the places and artefacts of the French national consciousness evokes territorial perspectives – of 'Paris-province', 'Centre and periphery', 'North-South', and 'the soil'.

In short, the problematisation of links between cities and the countryside is a classic figure of French political rhetoric; perhaps even a 'French passion', according to the geographer Philippe Estèbe.⁷ Yet despite the shared concern for this issue, the positions of the candidates in the presidential election were far from identical, even if they all expressed the same solicitude towards less-dense territories.

Marine Le Pen proposed to regroup spatial planning, transport and housing in a single ministry and 'to rebalance the *politique de la ville* (urban policy) towards deserted⁸ and rural areas'. In essence she was taking up the position and analysis which schematically contrasts 'peripheral France' with a 'France of metropolises', and sees a 'France of the countryside and peri-urban zones' marked by socio-economic decline and a withdrawal of public services. This binary reading of the

territory has been contradicted by geographers who have clearly shown the diversity of development trajectories in metropolises as well as in small towns and the countryside.

However, Marine Le Pen drew on the 'peripheral France' discourse to question the *politique de la ville* – the policy in favour of working-class neighbourhoods in large cities.⁹ This policy was presented by Le Pen as soaking up public funds to the detriment of rural and peri-urban areas. This cultivation of a sense of grievance against other places and groups – for example 'left-behind' places versus the big cities (London/Washington, etc.); 'hard-done-to natives' versus 'immigrants' – echoed similar tropes deployed by recent populist movements in the US and UK.

This discourse also implied criticism of the expense of place-based public policies pursued to support deprived neighbourhoods – where many ethnic minorities and immigrants live – which, it was alleged, are undertaken to the detriment of the needs of the 'indigenous' population living in the countryside and suburban areas. Here again there were strong echoes of recent populist claims elsewhere – for example those heard during the UK's 2016 EU referendum and its aftermath, to the effect that immigrants were taking housing and job opportunities from 'locals'.

In short, even if it had changed its language and sought to cultivate a more mainstream image, the *Front National* remained a party of the extreme right, something that could be discerned from a reading of its stance on territorial policies during the election.

Reforms of territorial governance – no permanent French revolution?

In a country with over 36,000 local communes it is perhaps unsurprising that the re-grouping of local government areas has been a permanent subject of debate and action over recent decades. Initiatives to foster consolidation were particularly marked in the 1990s, with a concerted effort at the turn of the century.

The recent NOTRe law of 2015¹⁰ has profoundly affected inter-municipal groupings. Their minimum size has been reduced to 15,000 inhabitants, other than in exceptional cases. According to data from the Directorate General of Local Authorities of the Ministry of the Interior, France had 1,266 public inter-municipal co-operation bodies on 1 January 2017, compared with 2,061 a year earlier.

With such developments, is it possible that the country is reaching a kind of tipping point in its local territorial governance arrangements? Perhaps. But the speeches of the candidates in the presidential election often stressed the enduring importance of the communal level, not least perhaps because any candidate had to obtain the sponsorship of 500 local mayors to run in the election! After the recent significant cycle of reforms¹¹ most elected officials and local authority officers also feel that a pause in 'quasi-permanent' territorial reform is needed.

As a result, most candidates for the presidency did not propose radical changes, with François Fillon of the *Republicains*, for example, clearly stating that he did not wish to undertake a new territorial reform. The most 'Jacobin'¹² candidates expressed the strongest attachment to the commune. This was particularly so for Marine Le Pen, and to a lesser extent for Jean-Luc Mélenchon. According to this political tradition, the 'multiplication' of the places/sites of power favoured by the inter-municipal groupings is experienced as a form of betrayal of popular sovereignty. The latter, it is argued, should be expressed in one place, through one person, and in one assembly. It is argued that the 'people' and their 'will' are one and indivisible, and so cannot be represented in a multitude of different places. The scales of belonging and legitimate representation for the 'Jacobins' are typically viewed as being the 'traditional' local (communal) and national levels.

On the related issue of the relations between the state and sub-state territorial authorities, the latest presidential campaign was distinguished from its recent predecessors by the absence of proposals for further decentralisation. Only Emmanuel Macron asserted that he was a 'Girondin'.¹³ There are some important contextual factors to bear in mind here – notably that the 'regionalisms' which have for many

years pushed for new waves of decentralisation are currently in fairly sharp retreat. In addition, some argue that many of the expectations of decentralisation in terms of local democracy and the effectiveness of public management have not necessarily been realised.

There were also other contextual political factors which played a role. Shifting power and competences up and down the scales of 'multi-level governance' was not a popular option among the majority of candidates. If decentralisation was not the order of the day, then neither was enhanced supra-nationalism, with only Emmanuel Macron and Benoit Hamon (the *Partie Socialiste* candidate) being in favour of further boosting the EU's problem-solving capacity. For most candidates in the presidential election, the nation state and local scales were the key, as seen either from a 'top-down' statist angle or from a bottom-up perspective of viewing local territories as the spatial expression of representation and identity and the building blocks of an indivisible people and national state territory.

The 2017 French presidential election – winning from the centre

The first round of voting in the French presidential election was marked by strong representation of different political positions, with the candidates from the leftist *France Insoumise* party, the far right *Front National*, centre right *Les Republicains* and Macron's centrist *En Marche* movement each attracting around 20% of the votes cast. Macron came first (24.01%), with Marine Le Pen in second place (21.3%), and they therefore both progressed to the second round of voting. In the latter Macron won convincingly with 66% of the votes cast, exceeding pre-election and exit poll predictions.

In June 2017 his new party, *La République en Marche* (LReM), also secured a majority in the parliamentary elections with its allies the centrist *MoDem* party – although on a very low overall turnout (perhaps a result of election fatigue and the decision since 2002 to hold parliamentary elections so close to the presidential elections to give new presidents a strong mandate for action). At the election LReM fielded 50% female and 50% male candidates, many of whom were political novices, and the new parliament has seen an unprecedented turnover in representatives, with 75% of MPs being new to the 'hemicycle' (the nickname for the chamber of the National Assembly).¹⁴

Another change was the end, following a new law passed in 2012, of the so-called '*cumul des mandats*' (the holding of multiple elected offices). Since the beginning of the Fifth Republic, most of the deputies

in the National Assembly have also been mayors of local communes, and this ended with the election of the 2017 parliament. Many of the LR&M deputies, in contrast, had never even been mayors before. This represented both a significant and rather subtle change in the composition of parliament, which has become a more genuinely 'National Assembly' than an assembly of local mayors, or presidents of departmental councils.

Macron's success has been widely seen internationally and in the wake of reversals for populist parties in other European countries such as Austria, the Netherlands, Italy and Finland as marking a breaking of the populist wave of 2016 which delivered so-called 'Brexit' in the UK and the Trump presidency in the US. What has happened in France has led to a resurgence of optimism and faith in progressive politics among observers – notably abroad, where the new president's early performance on the international stage on issues such as climate change has been applauded.

Some, though, have moved rapidly and rather lazily to pigeonhole Macron as the ex-banker likely to be an enthusiastic neoliberaliser and nothing more. Others, such as UK commentator Will Hutton, have pointed out that Macron's plans to 'refashion' the state's 'priorities around public spending at around 50% of GDP, together with labour market regulation and open trading policies that emulate the Nordics' might be compared with the UK Labour Party's recent 'socialist manifesto', which 'would lift Britain's public spending to just over 40% of GDP ... with tax rates still lower than in France'.¹⁵ To adapt LP Hartley's famous phrase, it seems that 'France is a foreign country: they do things differently there'!

But even as the Republic endures and rejuvenates, the challenges Macron faces are significant. Although the vote for the *Front National* collapsed in the parliamentary elections in June compared with the presidential election in May,¹⁶ there are still territorial differences in voting patterns and significant challenges for the new president.

It was notable that during his victory rally – at which he emerged from the precincts of the Louvre Palace to the strains of Beethoven and Schiller's *An die Freude/Ode to Joy* – he sought to heal rifts in French society. He quickly and firmly asked a small minority of his supporters who had booed a mention in his speech of the *Front National's* voters to recognise that the goal was reconciliation and making sure that such voters would never in future feel disenfranchised enough to heed the hollow clarion calls of populism. Here was a president elected by the 66% pledging not to forget and forsake the 34%.

Territorial policy under the Macron presidency – early days, but what might we expect?

Early indications are that the Macron presidency will focus its urban and territorial policy around three key themes:

- a shift from pursuing the equality of territories to the cohesion of territories;
- a continuation in support for neighbourhood regeneration and renewal; and
- a maintained commitment to addressing climate change at home and abroad.

From the equality of territories to the cohesion of territories?

Following the presidential election, the ministry responsible for territorial affairs had its name changed from the *Ministère de l'Aménagement du Territoire, de la Ruralité et des Collectivités Territoriales* (2016–2017) (Ministry for *Aménagement du Territoire, Ruralité and Territorial Authorities*) to the *Ministère de la Cohésion des Territoires* (Ministry for the Cohesion of Territories). The notion of equality of territories had led to policies which focused on addressing rural and urban imbalances, or relations between *métropoles* and non-metropolitan territories.

The adoption of the term '*cohésion*' implies two principal things. First, it represents an evolution from a 'binary' reading of territories and territorial challenges (for example rural areas and lives are 'like this', urban areas and lives are 'like that') to a more 'systemic' reading which considers and seeks to address the realities of citizens' lives within their territories rather than identifying specific territorial weaknesses and problems. The new language also represents an alignment with the terminology used at European level in discussions and policies aimed at strengthening territorial cohesion. In a sense this may appear unsurprising from a president who strongly identified with European co-operation and partnership throughout his campaign.

It may also represent an evolution towards more endogenously considered approaches to territorial development (in which public action seeks to aid places in making the most of their intrinsic attributes to develop themselves), rather than a more traditional approach that seeks to foster territorial balance (typically through a redistributive regional policy which may make significant transfers from more prosperous to less prosperous areas).

These changes are perhaps not that new, but stand in a line of continuity which has seen the role, instruments and scales of *aménagement du territoire* change since its inception in the post-war years – notably in response to the economic crisis of

the 1970s, decentralisation, economic restructuring, and changing views about the centrality of public action in societal and economic affairs.

A continuation in support for neighbourhood regeneration and renewal

The policy in relation to neighbourhood renewal and regeneration seems set to be marked by continuity. The national *'programme de rénovation urbaine'*, which addresses the issues of deprived neighbourhoods frequently found in the suburbs of the cities, will continue, and it has recently been announced that its budget could be doubled to 10 billion euros. However, the level of funding for local authorities in general is still being debated, with the government stating it wishes to see a decline in this.¹⁷ Action to address issues of educational attainment will also be pursued, with proposals to limit class sizes to 12 pupils per class at CP and CE1 level (years 1 and 2 in England – i.e. 5-7 year olds) in the *zones d'éducation prioritaire* (education priority zones). But in general it seems that the forms and instruments of *la politique de la ville* (the national urban policy addressing social issues facing more deprived areas) will not be reformed and that continuity will be the main theme. This in itself is significant given that during the elections a part of the mainstream right and Le Pen of the far right had wanted to abolish this policy.

Finally, it is worth noting that while none of the candidates for the presidency had been particularly involved in planning and urban issues, the new French prime minister, the centre right Edouard Philippe, was previously mayor of Le Havre, where he coveted the planning brief and apparently demonstrated a keen interest in the UNESCO listed architecture of the city, which was re-planned after the Second World War by Auguste Perret.¹⁸

Make the planet great again! A maintained commitment to addressing climate change

Perhaps Macron's most visible action on the international stage to date has been his swift response to Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the US from the agreement made at the 'COP 21' UN Climate Change Conference in Paris in 2015. Within a matter of days the new French president had launched an appeal to experts and citizens to come to France and work on climate change science and societal responses of mitigation and adaptation. This initiative – which cheekily stole the syntactical clothes of Trump's mantra 'Make America great again' – was presented under the slogan 'Make our planet great again'.¹⁹



Catherine Sykes

Le Havre town hall, where the new French prime minister, Edouard Philippe, was previously mayor

France is a relatively *'bon élève'* (good student) when it comes to its comparative position in GDP rankings as compared with its greenhouse gas emissions. But as ever this reflects a complex reality – not least the country's heavy dependence on nuclear energy, and also its endowment with relatively abundant geographical opportunities and facilities for the exploitation of 'first generation' renewable sources (notably *'la houille blanche'* – hydropower).

Macron's position on the nuclear industry has vacillated, and he has some hard decisions to make about the future of some of France's older nuclear facilities, which are approaching the end of their useful (and some claim safely extendable) operating lives. The new prime minister not only has past experience of urban issues and planning but also previously worked for the French nuclear industry – a fact which has not gone unnoticed on the green and left wings of French politics.

Elsewhere on the domestic front the Ministry of Environment has been renamed the Ministry of

Ecological Transition, with Nicolas Hulot, a popular environmental campaigner and TV presenter, as its new minister. With the continued commitment to the outcomes of 'COP 21', this appointment – alongside the international activity mentioned above – is a clear sign that there is sustained momentum for addressing climate change. This can build on a base of the many national schemes for biodiversity, renewable energy and the circular economy promoted during the past decade. In the 1990s, 'sustainable development' as a paradigm profoundly modified the instruments and daily activities of planning. In the next decade, the new 'transition path' being plotted could similarly become one of the most important elements transforming administrative and technical planning bodies in France.

Conclusion

Clifford Harper's haunting new thumbnail sketch for 'Europe Inside Out' at the head of this piece conveys a sense of gazing across the Channel beyond the confines of Britain's island shores. In this spirit, this article has considered recent political developments in our nearest continental neighbour, France, in terms of some of their territorial/place-based implications. It has noted how in the recent French presidential elections a pause in institutional reforms of the territorial organisation of the Republic following the legislative activism of recent years was a rather rare point of consensus between candidates with otherwise widely differing views. After the key laws and reforms that punctuated the 2014-15 period and which are still bedding down, the appetite for future significant reforms was somewhat suppressed.

Yet the presidential campaign was nevertheless characterised by more or less explicit visions and versions of place, space and territory, with contrasts between the 'Jacobins' and 'sovereignists', who generally favoured centralism and privileged the national and local levels and state (François Fillon of the centre right *Republicains*, the leftist Mélenchon and Le Pen of the far right), and those like the centrist Macron and socialist Hamon with more 'Girondin', or 'decentralising', tendencies.

On a wider front Macron's victory may well herald a period of renewed European confidence,²⁰ with implications for EU activism in fields such as cohesion and environmental policy; and – to return briefly to the UK's current situation – he has also explicitly extended the hand of friendship to Britain, emphasising that the door for continued membership of the EU is 'still open'.²¹ Internationally he has made an early bid to set the agenda for continued global co-operation and action to address climate change.

The new president has started his term at a blistering pace with a clear sense of purpose. But it is early days and there are many challenges ahead which Macron himself repeatedly described as '*immense*' during his victory speech. Many of these have a strong spatial and territorial dimension, notably around economic and social issues. While there are signs of continuity as well as change on territorial matters, it already seems clear that the instruments and practitioners of planning will have their role to play if Macron's vision of a renewed France is to be realised.

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Notes

- 1 P Inman: 'UK retail sales dive sparks biggest FTSE 250 fall since last summer'. *The Guardian*, 15 Jun. 2017. www.theguardian.com/business/2017/jun/15/uk-retail-sales-brexite-inflation-prices-pay-consumer-spending
- 2 B Chu: 'The chart that shows the UK economy was the weakest in Europe in the first quarter of 2017'. *The Independent*, 8 Jun. 2017. www.independent.co.uk/News/business/news/gdp-brexite-europe-uk-economy-weakest-first-quarter-of-2017-a7778576.html
- 3 See, for example, presentations from 'Implications of BREXIT for environmental assessment and management in the UK'. IEMA Workshop, Liverpool, 14 Jun. 2017. <https://fischersite.wordpress.com/2017/06/16/presentations-of-workshop-implications-of-brexite-for-environmental-assessment-and-management-in-the-uk/>
- 4 For an earlier reflection on these kinds of issues, see O Sykes: 'Anti-politics, professionals and a bear called Paddington'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2014, Vol. 83, Dec., 572-5
- 5 'Entretien – La campagne présidentielle de 2017: une vision de la ville de demain difficile à percevoir'. Interview of Xavier Desjardins, by Daniel Florentin and Charlotte Ruggeri. *Urbanités* website. Apr. 2017. www.revue-urbanites.fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Urbanite%20-%20Entretien-Desjardins.pdf
- 6 P Nora (Ed): *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*. Columbia University Press, Vols 1-3, 1996-98
- 7 P Estèbe: *L'égalité des territoires, une passion française*. PUF (Presses universitaires de France), 2015, p.96
- 8 In the sense of 'rural desertification' (i.e. loss of population, services and activities, etc.) rather than physical desertification
- 9 'Entretien – L'urbain semble être partout, sauf dans cette campagne présidentielle'. Interview of Renaud Epstein, by Daniel Florentin and Charlotte Ruggeri. *Urbanités* website. Apr. 2017. www.revue-urbanites.fr/entretien-lurbain-sembre-etre-partout-sauf-dans-cette-campagne-presidentielle
- 10 The Nouvelle Organisation Territoriale de la République (NOTRe) law of 2015 gave new competences to regions and redefined those attributed to different territorial authorities. See www.gouvernement.fr/action/la-reforme-territoriale

- 11 Including not just the NOTRe law but also the *Modernisation de l'action publique territoriale et d'affirmation des métropoles* (MAPTAM) law of 2014, which confirms the status of *métropoles* as motors of growth and territorial attractiveness. Conurbations of over 400,000 inhabitants gained full competences in the fields of economic development, innovation, energy transition and urban policy (*politique de la ville*). The new *métropoles* could also exercise in place of their constituent member municipalities certain competences in the fields of economic development, spatial planning, local housing policy, urban policy, management of community services and protection of the environment. See www.gouvernement.fr/action/les-metropoles and <http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/glossaire/maptam-loi>
- 12 A 'Jacobin' is a supporter of a more centralised state
- 13 A 'Girondin' is in favour of a more decentralised or federalised political system
- 14 A Nossiter: 'Emmanuel Macron's amateur politicians are poised to remake French parliament'. *New York Times*, 10 Jun. 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/06/10/world/europe/emmanuel-macron-france-french-elections.html?_r=0; and A Sénécât: 'Après les législatives 2017, 75% de l'Assemblée nationale est renouvelée, un record'. *Le Monde*, 19 Jun. 2017. www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/06/19/apres-les-legislatives-2017-75-de-l-assemblee-nationale-est-renouvelee-un-record_5147128_4355770.html
- 15 W Hutton: 'Macron has led a brilliant coup – could the British now do the same?'. *The Observer*, 18 Jun. 2017. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/17/macron-brilliant-coup-could-british-do-same
- 16 The *Front National* saw its vote share decline from 21.5% in the first round of the presidential election to 8.75% in the second round of the parliamentary elections, winning eight seats
- 17 See 'Rénovation urbaine: la dotation doublée comme promis selon le secrétaire d'Etat aux Territoires'. *BoursesdesCrédit*, Jul. 2017. www.boursesdescredits.com/actualite-renovation-urbaine-dotation-doublee-promis-secretaire-etat-territoires-3361.php
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- 19 See www.makeourplanetgreatagain.fr
- 20 N Nougayrède: 'Britain is leaving the EU – just as Europe is on the up'. *The Guardian*, 18 Jun. 2017. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/18/brexit-europe-eu-golden-decade-merkel-macron
- 21 M Rose and E Piper: 'France's Macron says EU door remains open to UK'. Webpage. Reuters, 13 Jun. 2017. www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-eu-france-idUSKBN1942KF