

Démocratie

# JEAN-MARIE LE PEN (1928-2025): AN ATTEMPT TO ASSESS A POLITICAL LIFE

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**Jean-Marie Le Pen is dead. Jean-Yves Camus, co-director of the Observatoire des radicalités politiques at the Fondation Jean-Jaurès, offers his analysis of the political record of the man who succeeded in raising the far right from the ashes.**

Read in *French*

Jean-Marie Le Pen, who has just died, was a man born in 1928 into the values of the Third Republic, who became involved in politics under the Fourth Republic as part of the Poujadisme movement (he was elected as a member of parliament in 1956) and who reached his apotheosis under the Fifth Republic, forging France's third-largest political party, the Front National, from scratch.

He left a lasting mark on political history because he was able to lift the far right out of the electoral marginality to which it had been successively confined by the purge and the failure of the supporters of French Algeria. It cannot be stressed enough that the Poujadist moment was very short-lived: it appeared in 1953 and disappeared in 1958 with General de Gaulle's return to power. Le Pen, who had been one of its stars but who was highly critical of Pierre Poujade's management methods and tactical errors, pondered the lessons of this missed opportunity and managed to keep the party afloat. Despite strong headwinds from both outside (demonisation) and inside (internal crises including the ousting of the megretists at the end of 1998), he managed to keep afloat a boat launched in 1972 which he only left, forced and obliged by his daughter and successor, in 2015 when he was stripped of all his functions within the movement.

This longevity alone, reinforced by spectacular electoral gains, is remarkable in the history of his political family. How did Le Pen manage to last? Firstly by imposing himself, as a fine tactician, as the effective and undisputed president of a party, the Front National, which he did not create, since it was the militants of the **activist group *Ordre nouveau*** (ON) who, in 1972, came up with the idea of broadening their base by bringing together other extreme right-wing groupings, in order to carry weight on the one hand, and to be able to continue to exist after a dissolution which their violence

made inevitable, on the other. It was Ordre nouveau that came looking for Le Pen to give him a presidency that was only intended to be formal, and in the end it was Le Pen who gained the upper hand by taking advantage of the dissolution of ON, a number of whose leaders founded the Parti des forces nouvelles (PFN) in 1974, which was, briefly, the only competition to the FN, briefly the only competition to the fledgling FN, before its leaders, in an episode that remains to be written, joined the CNIP, the RPR or the Parti républicain, where they imported a number of ideological tropes that resonated with those of the FN.

Le Pen was also able to put into practice a policy of 'nationalist compromise' within the FN, i.e. uniting all the components of the far right around a common minimum programme. 'Nationalist compromise' is a concept coined at the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century by Charles Maurras. On the one hand, it means that it is possible, in times of national peril, to ally with right-wing forces with whom you share the goal of safeguarding the nation and French nationalism above all else: this is what led to the election of Maurrasian royalists to parliament on Bloc National lists in 1919. Le Pen, who declared on 16 April 2022 on the CNews channel that she had 'always wanted the right to come together', was skilful enough to have always persuaded certain right-wing elected representatives to advocate, or even to enter into an alliance with the FN at local and regional level, without himself requesting such alliances, and without compromising on the fact that, when they were concluded, they had to include programmatic concessions to the ideas of the Front: This is what happened after the 1997 regional elections in the regions where, against the advice of the right-wing national apparatus, coalitions were formed in the regional councils. But the 'nationalist compromise' also meant getting different, if not diametrically opposed, sensibilities to work together within the FN.

Jean-Marie Le Pen undoubtedly understood, when he agreed to take over the presidency of the FN, the very particular moment of national memory in which France found itself at the time. Gaullism had, in fact, been liquidated since the death of General de Gaulle (1970). More and more questions were being asked about the real feelings of the French towards Vichy, the motivations of those who collaborated and their post-war trajectory. The documentary *Le chagrin et la pitié* was released in 1971; Zeev Sternhell published his thesis on Maurice Barrès in 1972, followed by his book on *the revolutionary right* (1978). Later (1981), Robert O. Paxton and Michael R. Marrus on *Vichy and the Jews* and Bernard-Henri Lévy's highly publicised *L'idéologie française*.

The Front National, still a small group, was taking its first steps in a period of intense questioning about a taboo period in its history. The ghetto in which the far right was confined until the founding of the Front National, despite the 5.2% obtained by Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour in the 1965 presidential election, seemed to leave little hope for the 'nationals' and 'nationalists' who had supported him. At the time, the majority of public opinion was still stigmatised for anything

reminiscent of collaboration, the Vichy regime and the Leagues of the 1930s, and this was not without a good dose of bad faith and selective amnesia when you consider the number of supporters of Marshal Pétain, and even of more far-reaching collaboration, who returned to the corridors of power after 1945. Similarly, while the intellectual elites questioned France's complicity, the passage of time meant that the disqualifications that had once been applied to collaborators and OAS members, who had all been amnestied, became less and less effective in the eyes of public opinion.

Cynically, it could be said that Le Pen's strength lay in his ability to strike a balance between former collaborators who had joined the FN and former members of the Resistance who had been active in it (not just Georges Bidault, very briefly, but also Pierre Sergent, Michel de Camaret and Count Horace Savelli, who were companions of the Liberation, Senator Gilbert Devèze, Rolande Birgy, Righteous Among the Nations, etc.), just as he made it possible for the public to see that the former collaborators were not the only ones who had been amnestied. ), just as it made possible the coexistence of traditionalist Catholics and neo-pagans of the 'volkisch' persuasion, of defectors from the traditional right and neo-Nazis from the FANE, not to mention nationalist-revolutionaries and conservatives, former Gaullists and former OAS conspirators. This combination, which should have been a wobbly one, held together somehow because Le Pen skilfully played them off against each other, bringing them together on a minimalist programme of nationalism, opposition to immigration, anti-elitist populism and skilful capture of all the discontent in the various categories.

At first sight, Le Pen failed in his attempt to establish himself as the indestructible leader of an FN where, as he used to say, 'there is no number two, only a number one', when he parted company with Bruno Mégret in December 1998, ten years after he had become the movement's general delegate. But was it really a failure? The Mouvement National Républicain, the Mégret split, withered and disappeared. There have been splits before (Front d'opposition nationale, 1985; Parti nationaliste français, 1983), there will be splits after (Parti de la France, 2009), but they will have the insignificant fate of all the splits, or almost all the splits, of the major European national-populist parties. What's more, many of the megretist cadres have returned to the FN fold and, since Marine Le Pen took over, have held positions of responsibility or elected office. They have clashed with the man Jean-Marie Le Pen over a style of governance, over certain ideas (the union of the right), but in the end and to this day, they remain in the nationalist family.

Finally, Le Pen has a rare foresight of the themes that will stir public opinion: if he does not detect them himself, he listens to those who suggest them to him. As early as the founding meeting on 5 October 1972, when Alain Robert, leader of Ordre nouveau, was still on the podium, the FN used the theme of the 'great alternative' it would represent in the face of France's decadence: a banner bore

the slogan 'Avec nous, avant qu'il ne soit trop tard' ('With us, before it's too late'). During the legislative campaign in March 1978, the FN, perhaps under the influence of François Duprat, took up the theme of immigration and its 'dangers' with this slogan: '1 million unemployed is 1 million immigrants too many! France and the French come first ». Jean-Marie Le Pen's FN was also the first political figure to use the expression 'foreign submersion' in a party bulletin dated May 1983. In 1985 the theme of 'national preference' appeared, an expression generally attributed to Jean-Yves Le Gallou, who then joined the FN. Then came the issue of the Islamisation of France: according to historian Valérie Igounet, 'the first FN poster against Islamism was printed in 1987 by Jean-Pierre Stirbois'. She explains: 'The FN logo does not appear on it, but on a green background you can see the minaret of a mosque with the words "Inch'Allah" and a quote from a Hezbollah leader: "In twenty years, it's certain, France will be an Islamic republic"'.

The mistake made by those on the nationalist right who continue to praise Jean-Marie Le Pen's actions is to forget that, as Jean Madiran wrote about Maurras, the disciples of a master politician must always 'aloud make the deduction of the liabilities'. Unfortunately for the FN, this is a heavy one, because the political instincts of its leader were accompanied by recurring fads that permanently tarnished the party's image and destroyed the possibilities of an agreement between it and the so-called 'governing' right. During the 1988 campaign, Le Pen boasted that he 'said out loud what everyone else was thinking'. Did he really think he was expressing the *vox populi* silenced by 'political correctness' when he described the Nazi gas chambers as 'a mere detail in the history of the Second World War' (September 1987)? Or when, in January 2005, he told the weekly *Rivarol* that 'the German occupation was not particularly inhumane'? Or when he told the traditionalist Catholic daily *Présent* (1989) that 'the great internationals, like the Jewish international, play a not inconsiderable role in the creation of the anti-national spirit'? Or again, in August 1996, when he said: 'I believe in the inequality of races, yes... Of course, it's obvious. All of history proves it. They do not have the same capacity, nor the same level of historical evolution ».

It is possible that Le Pen thought that a significant proportion of French people shared these judgements and prejudices. It is also possible that, by making these statements, he wanted to dip a kind of thermometer into public opinion to gauge their level of acceptability, to see how far he could continue to transgress. But if that were all these declarations were, he would have stopped them sooner, realising their disastrous impact and the use made of them by the rest of the political spectrum to put in place a cordon sanitaire which, in the 1997 regional elections, saw the Right go back on the agreements which had been concluded in five regions, at the price of ideological concessions, to form a majority in the regional councils. Le Pen repeated his statement on the gas chambers in 1995. In 2013, he made outrageous remarks about the Roma in Nice. In 2014, his statement on solving the demographic problem in Africa through the Ebola virus caused a scandal:

he did not disown it. We can therefore conclude that the 'slips' may have a tactical dimension, but that they reveal deeply-rooted thinking and prejudices. But it is no excuse to say this: Jean-Marie Le Pen was a man of his milieu, of his time – the prejudices he expressed, too.

Were these 'outbursts', like the disastrous pun aimed at the minister Michel Durafour (1988), just 'slip-ups'? To have been twelve years old at the fall of the Third Republic was to have grown up at a time when racial insults, anti-Semitism, anti-Freemasonry and hatred of homosexuals were widely shared, including within the Left, part of which had been antidreyfusard and showed, with Marcel Déat, Jacques Doriot and others, that it would not shy away from any denial. In Brittany at the time, Jews were strange strangers, very few in number, but attacked by a local press which, at the time of the Dreyfus affair and again at the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, included anti-Semitic **writers**, while in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, until the early 1920s, Morbihan's elected representatives came from a local aristocracy that was willingly monarchist, clerical, anti-Masonic and anti-Jewish. Between 1942 and February 1944, the deportation of the department's Jews affected around fifty people, most of whom lived in Vannes, Lorient and Larmor-Plage. It is impossible to say exactly what Le Pen and his fellow citizens of La Trinité-sur-Mer knew. Le Pen's attitude to the genocide of the Jews was undoubtedly due more to indifference and common sense prejudice than to doctrinal anti-Semitism. Although, from 1972 onwards, he gave the floor and the pen to notorious anti-Semites both within the party and in its press, and although he has always opposed the Pleven and Gayssot laws as well as a 'freedom of historical research' which only benefits denialists, his own adherence to the latter's theses came late. Le Pen has an absolute inability to apologise, to backtrack, and he explained to me why, realising that his statement on the 'point of detail' had gone beyond his mind, he refused to go back on it. This is an essential character trait, as is – and his Memoirs bear witness to this in their first volume – the roughness of character inherited from the environment, that of the sea and the world of fishing, in which he grew up. It was a modest environment that produced men who were hard-working and hard to please, and one from which he retained the conviction that willpower and hard work enable those who really want to rise without the help of the welfare state, to carve out their own path to a material affluence that he certainly enjoyed, but which he felt he owed only to his own merits. Le Pen, a self-confessed Reagan-Thatcherite, a 'people's tribune', as he called the second volume of his memoirs, but having distanced himself from it, remained a man of the Thirty Glorious, incapable, despite the FN's cosmetic 'social turn' during the great strikes of 1995, to broaden the popular base of his movement as his daughter had done, because he remained basically a man of the right, a man of the Party of Order who, as Boulangism proves, gives himself the appearance of a revolutionary and always ends up on the side of reaction. That's how his low score in the 2007 presidential election came about, against a Nicolas Sarkozy who had played the 'France that gets up early' card, security and firmness in the face of 'unregulated' immigration.

We could go on and on. For want of anything better to say, we'll end with a quick look at the leader and his succession, in the very particular configuration of the interweaving of the political and filial bonds. Jean-Marie Le Pen is often described as a party leader who did not want power, unlike his daughter. This is undoubtedly not true. In a little-known interview he gave in 2009 to the nationalist-revolutionary magazine *Réfléchir et agir*, he claimed to have done everything necessary to obtain the highest score his party could hope for, with the entire political class and the media against him. Which is understandable. He also indicated that his ambition was not just to win votes, but to exert a lasting influence on the debate on ideas. And it has succeeded. On the basis of the electoral base thus built up, Jean-Marie Le Pen decided in 2010 to step down as President of the FN and not to be a candidate in the 2012 presidential election. The fact that it was his daughter, Marine, who succeeded him at the January 2011 Congress has led some observers to deduce that he 'offered' her the post on a platter, in a clannish way that made him confuse the movement with a family business. It is true that he preferred his daughter to succeed him, but this did not happen without putting her to the test, without gauging her political and media skills between 1998, when she obtained her first elected mandate, and 2010. As early as 1998, in the complicated context of the tension between Mégret and Le Pen that led to the split of the party, he entrusted her with a legal department within the FN apparatus whose mission, among other things, was to counter the influence of the megretists: this can hardly be considered a gift. In the run-up to the Congress, which will decide between Bruno Gollnisch and Marine Le Pen, a real electoral campaign is underway, which is also a debate on the political line. It is already the 'de-demonisation' of the party that is at stake and that is the choice of the militants. From that date until the final ousting of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the opposition between the founder of the FN and his successor is a complex affair which undoubtedly has an intimate dimension that it is not for the political scientist to comment on, as he cannot hold the keys. Let us simply note that, as Jean-Marie Le Pen's subsequent adventure with the Comités Jeanne proves, the divide between them was above all generational and political, with the number of historic Lepénistes within the governing bodies dwindling over time, completing the turning of a page.

Having observed the Front National and the Rassemblement National since 1982, I can only conclude this obituary by certifying one thing: it was certain at the time, for all our masters in the field of political science and history, that the extreme right, as it was called, belonged to the past and would not be revived, stricken as it had been since 1945 by a moral ostracism that placed it definitively in the camp of the reprobate. Jean-Marie Le Pen will always be remembered as the man who proved this prediction wrong.

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