

Opposing Forces? France's Green Campaign Seeks to Inspire Both Joy and Anger

Article by Mélanie Vogel

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The French presidential election is scheduled for 10 and 24 April 2022. Yannick Jadot is the ecologists' candidate. Mélanie Vogel, a senator representing overseas French citizens since September 2021, is also one of the youngest French parliamentarians. In the context of a weakened Left, the rise of the far right, and France's EU presidency, she tells us about the vision of the Greens for this presidential campaign.

Green European Journal: The ecologist primary designated Yannick Jadot as a candidate for the presidential election. How did this process work?

Mélanie Vogel: The primary was organised by the "ecologist pole", which brought together several ecologist parties in France, among them EELV (*Europe Écologie - Les Verts*). It was organised around a common project and a common ambition: that of providing French citizens with a Green candidate at the presidential election that unites the ecologist family.

While the start of the campaign was dominated by discussions about a potential candidate to represent the Left as a whole, our common observation within the pole was that there must be a Green candidate, because the alternative would be totally anachronistic. There are more and more young people who say they are suffering from what is called eco-anxiety; this isn't just anxiety about the climate crisis, but a combination of that and the fact that politicians are not trying to solve it, just like in the film *Don't Look Up*.

This shared conviction was the basis of the primary, which was open to members of all the participating parties, as well as to anyone sharing our vision and wishing to participate in it, for a fee of 2 euros. In total, almost 123,000 people voted. The common policy platform established by the primary was then expanded through the proposals of Yannick Jadot and the various candidates, as well as through an extensive process of consultation after the candidate was selected.

So the primary's mandate was to build a positive campaign that puts forward solutions and offers an alternative to those who don't want the far right, nor the Macronist, productivist status quo. Collectively, we set out to show how ecology can be the great unifying project in France, one which can give us hope again.

Yannick Jadot talks about enthusiasm, but also about the need to dramatise the issues so that people become aware of the urgency, seeking to address eco-anxiety while creating glimmers of hope. How do you strike a balance between the two?

Many sociological studies have shown that it is difficult for human beings to act in a truly anticipatory way. Politically, we also know that good policies of prevention are always tricky to promote, because they are not visible. A good prevention policy is an invisible one, whether it be for environmental or public health issues. It is the same with the climate crisis: this is about the capacity of human beings to commit to something that, if it works well, will not be noticed. It is a great paradox of humanity.

It's not contradictory to dramatise while also trying to offer hope. I think that it is through dramatisation that we can get people to act, because they find it difficult to do so when they don't see the crisis. It's part of the same movement: we say that there is a massive task at hand, but also that we have a plan and that we can achieve it together. It's more exciting than just talking about a terrible crisis, or abstract words about a long-term future.

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Now that Greens have gained legitimacy in public opinion on environmental and climate issues, what room is left for them to address other political issues?

Today, we have undeniable credibility when it comes to warning about the dangers of the climate crisis. Even our opponents can see that what we were saying 30 years ago was based on totally rational scientific realities. According to Jadot, one of the entry points into this discussion is that in the French political debate there are "death impulses", such as those of the far right and the supporters of the productivist status quo, and that we, the ecologists, represent the "life impulses". This idea of life obviously involves the usual clichés about ecologists and the environment, but also encompasses public services – the defence of public hospitals and access to healthcare – and also high-quality agriculture. With this idea that ecologists are on the side of life rather than death, there is continuity across all sectors, not just environmental issues.

How is the climate issue being treated in the presidential campaign?

The climate issue has always been instrumentalised. After being denied for 50 years, today it is a matter of consensus around the facts among the political class. However, the narrative is that it is too serious and too important a problem to be managed by Greens, who are said to be in favour of a punitive form of environmentalism, with a return to the age of candlelight and so on. Our opponents try to caricature us by explaining that we want to ban everything: meat, foie-gras, cars, etc. – which is obviously totally false. What they are also trying to do, which is very striking – it is Emmanuel Macron's strategy, for example – is simply not to talk about the climate. It's a conscious strategy on their part. They know that if climate is put at the heart of the public debate, it will boost the Greens. According to the statistics, only 3 per cent of the public debate is devoted to it!

However, for the past two years, cities like Lyon, Grenoble, and Strasbourg have been governed by ecologists and have had very positive results. For example, the city of Lyon has introduced a basic income for young people, which is now showing its first fruits. A

positive message we can use and demonstrate to be true, is that where Greens have been given power, it works.

Our challenge is therefore to show that those who have been serious and reasonable, throughout history, have been the ecologists. They are not the ones breaking the Paris Agreement, not investing in renewables, reviving nuclear power and trade agreements, etc. What is punitive is doing nothing. This is what causes floods, heat waves, deaths from air pollution, etc. We want to both defend the record of our elected representatives and show that ecology in office works. We want to put the climate crisis at the heart of the debate, by bringing all the other issues into it: the economy, international politics, and so on.

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It's been argued that Emmanuel Macron has instrumentalised Europe and international issues for his own campaign. How can ecologists put forward their vision on these subjects?

Greens have denounced the fact that, unlike Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron decided to keep the presidency of the Council of the EU in the middle of a French presidential campaign, which allows him to instrumentalise it. This is also extremely unfortunate for the EU presidency, because the way he conducts negotiations on all issues is tailored to his campaign. For a so-called pro-European, this is astonishing; what the European Union needs is a president who works for the European Union, not who works to get Emmanuel Macron re-elected.

During the presidential campaign, as in general, French media coverage of European issues has been very poor. That said, I do hope that the French presidency of the EU will help to bring European issues into the public debate and to show what Macron's Europe is all about by putting some substance behind the rhetoric. On the institutional questions, there are many points on which we would agree with him, and we have no problem recognising that. But on European public policies, we have huge differences. Macron has always sought to sell himself as a super pro-European president. But which Europe are talking about? For example, on digital worker platforms like Uber, France is opposed to an automatic employee status. He is also against raising corporate taxes. On trade treaties, we also have a completely different vision. As for the climate, the objectives of reducing greenhouse gas emissions at European level have not even been transcribed into French law.

So I hope that we will be able to tackle European issues in a more politicised way and stop thinking that there are two camps, the pro-Europeans and the anti-Europeans – as if the pro-Europeans were all in agreement, as if there was only one Europe and you had to be either for or against it. This is the opposite of democracy. Democracy is about choosing between many options: more or less social justice, whether to tax companies, how much, etc.

Greens have always had an extremely clear position on European issues, both in France

and collectively at the European level. These are subjects on which we are very comfortable, since our positions are consistent with our vision and only exist within a strong, democratic Europe. Our positions do not exist within national borders alone. In contrast, other forces on the Left are comfortable saying that if they are elected, they will “go to Brussels” to demand a series of reforms, and if they don’t get what they want, they will leave the European Union or will go against the treaties or common European legislation. For us, a world in which we renounce democracy at the European level, or fail to respect the rule of law, cannot exist.

The far right is very present in this election and is a fixture in France. Many candidates allow themselves to be pulled onto their turf when it comes to the topics of public debate. What are the strategies of Jadot and his team to impose their own issues in the debate?

In France, we have the problem of having a very concentrated media system, with news channels that have become opinion channels and which relay mostly far-right ideology. These ideas are therefore making headway in the debate. We are faced with a dilemma. We must express indignation when fascist comments are made because not to react is tantamount to trivialising them. But we must also avoid granting these ideas more importance through greater visibility and attention. It’s a fine line to walk and it’s not always easy. We can’t let fascist ugliness go unchecked all the time, but we mustn’t give it a platform.

We must therefore oppose what they say with a positive and serious alternative. This is what we do, for example, on immigration: we clearly state that there is no problem with immigration in France. This is a subject on which we need strong, ambitious, and pragmatic public policies. In France there are 30,000 doctors of immigrant origin, the health service is in tatters – who can seriously suggest these people should be expelled? “Migrants” are people who work in hospitals, in industry, in construction, in public services, and everywhere in between. We also emphasise values in order to get away from utilitarian arguments. In short, on the one hand we demonstrate that what they say makes no sense, and on the other we focus on the positive values.

On the media context, how can smaller parties such as the Greens overcome the importance of polls in the media coverage of the presidential election?

France is a polling democracy, because of its majority system. The very big question for the electorate in general is that of tactical voting. People do not necessarily vote for the candidate they prefer, but rather for the candidate who is closest to their ideas and who has the best chance of reaching the second round. There is therefore an inordinate amount of attention paid to the polls. The problem is that these can become self-fulfilling prophecies, when people remain undecided for a long time during the campaign.

The Left, and the progressive camp in general, is very much diminished. This is perhaps an advantage for political ecology, because it is in a strong position in relative terms. How do you see, from now until the election and beyond, the strategic perspectives for political ecology within the Left and the progressive camp in France, given the difficulty of the situation?

The heirs of French social democracy, in the broadest sense, are not weak because they are divided, they are divided because they are weak. More broadly, it is the end of an era in the camp of progressives and humanists. Socialism was the great project of the 20th century, with social justice, new rights, and emancipation. We do not reject these values, but all this was thought out without taking into account that we live on a finite planet. The entire logic of solidarity and redistribution conceptualised by the French Left for a century is based on the notion that growth is necessary for prosperity, for justice. That model is totally obsolete. Ideologically, that vision is no longer able to respond to the challenges we face today. The major problems of the 21st century are not the same as those of the 20th century: the question is no longer just how to distribute wealth in a world that is constantly growing but how to respond to the climate crisis in a socially just way. And the answer is political ecology.

In the last European elections, there was the Ecologist list, the Génération.s list (the movement of Benoît Hamon, who left the Socialist Party), the Génération Écologie list (led by Delphine Batho), and the Socialist Party list (led by Raphaël Glucksmann). Our presidential campaign today brings together three of these lists: the Ecologists, Génération Écologie with Delphine Batho, and Génération.s. Meanwhile, the Socialists are divided. This splintering clearly shows the end of the era at work among the heirs of social democracy. Ecology, on the other hand, is in a reverse movement. For a very long time, ecologists were relatively divided in France, with many small parties. With the primary we are growing and uniting, while they are shrinking and dividing.

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Ecologists are sometimes criticised for being too focused on rationality and science and failing to appeal to people's humanity and emotions. In your opinion, what room should be left for emotions such as anger in the presidential campaign?

There must be room for anger, yes, but also for joy. Our approach to ecological issues is responsible and serious, but also joyful. It is about enthusiasm and pleasure – not cold showers and candles, but eating good food in nice places and being in good health. Opponents of political ecology have always tried to portray ecology as punitive, whereas it's the reverse: ecology is the positive path to avoid the punishing outcome of the climate crisis caused by a productivist society. And positive solutions already exist on the ground. So we organise events with people who are already changing society every day.

We need to convey that ecology that is not about austerity, guilt, or doom and gloom. It is about, for example, farmers talking about how their lives and farms are better since they went organic. We really want to show that our project is both joyous and rational. We are the ones on the side of science and reason and this is why our proposals can lay the

foundations for building a better world. The real punishment is to do nothing to change the world.



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