

Taking Power in a Crisis: France's Green Cities

Article by Benoît Monange, Bruno Bernard, Léonore Moncond'huy

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In June 2020, after a drawn-out process punctuated by the peak of the health crisis, Green lists excelled in France's municipal elections. They are now at the head of the executive in some of France's largest cities, including Marseille, Lyon, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, and Tours. We spoke to Bruno Bernard, president of the Greater Lyon metropolitan area, and Léonore Moncond'huy, the newly elected 30-year-old mayor of Poitiers, about how the pandemic affected their vision for the future, what Green government brings to a crisis, and ecology's place in the French political landscape.

Benoît Monange: French ecologists enjoyed unprecedented success in the 2020 municipal elections. What explains their performance?

Bruno Bernard: Above all, our project answered people's expectations, from fighting against pollution and developing mobility to greening the city and improving the urban environment. Ecology responded to the need to restore meaning to life in the city. Political fragmentation and the demise of social democracy undoubtedly contributed. But, in many cities, even where our candidates were not well known, the victories were down to proposals that met the aspirations of citizens. There is potential to progress even further because there are deep shifts at play: our programme appeals to younger generations. Fifteen-year-olds today are probably greener than most voters.

Léonore Moncond'huy: Ecology is no longer an intellectual or activist project on the margins but is increasingly anchored in the grassroots. The cultural battle is gradually being won, as the Citizen's Convention on Climate show.

In cities, the platforms that captured this interest in ecology were often open and left a large place for civil society. In Poitiers, the campaign was built around a collective approach bringing in new people and practices. It was more than just a party making some space for people; the approach was wholly based on citizens and political renewal.

Barcelona was a particular source of inspiration. The image of a city taking control of its political future through participation won us over. Our team met organisers from Barcelona to learn more precisely how they worked and what obstacles they faced. During the campaign, we said: "Poitiers is the new Barcelona!" Our platform, Poitiers Collectif, is based on three pillars: ecology, social justice, and democracy. Of course, ecologists are convinced that ecology is a "whole" that naturally comprises the social, and sometimes get fed up with insisting on this. But it's reassuring to voters to explain that social issues and democracy are fundamental too.

How did the health crisis affect the elections?

Bruno Bernard: We had to change how we campaigned and, in the long months between the rounds, our opponents strongly attacked the Greens. But, ultimately, the health risk was not a major factor. Abstention was high but also included part of our electorate. Some people linked the health crisis to the ecological crisis but economic uncertainty dissuaded others from voting Green. The largest differences between the rounds were in cities where Emmanuel Macron's En Marche allied with the centre-right to try to keep the Greens out. In Strasbourg and Bordeaux, voters punished these alliances.

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Léonore Moncond'huy: We stayed mobilised while the campaign was suspended. Events were organised to keep the debate going and anchor the wider conversation about the "world after" in Poitiers. The effect on the result is hard to read. The crisis increased awareness and the desire to take action. People turned towards local food networks, markets, and producers, and voting Green was in a way a logical extension. At the same time, many people turned to safe havens and stuck with the incumbents.

You entered office amid a triple health, economic, and social crisis. What do green politics bring to the exercise of power in a crisis?

Bruno Bernard: We do things differently, for sure. Decisions are made in a very collegial way. Seventy-five per cent of our elected officials have never held office before and there are 32 women to 26 men. Dual mandates are not permitted (*non-cumul*) because elected representatives should be fully invested in their role. In a crisis, we seek to go beyond short-term management, not rely solely on communication, and keep a longer-term vision. That's why we're in constant dialogue with economic and social actors and other elected officials to determine the most effective measures. I do not make thunderous daily announcements; we want to make a strong impact in the long term.

Léonore Moncond'huy: Crisis management is a skill that transcends political divisions and for which personal leadership is also important. In a crisis, any elected official has to protect the population, identify what is urgent, and anticipate what will happen next. Where ecologists distinguish themselves is on democracy and the reflection on the "post-crisis world". I was keen to ensure that crisis management did not exclude consultation, even when it's a challenge. Responsiveness requires making quick decisions, inventing new forms, and trusting all elected officials. Finally, ecology remains our compass. It would be useless to simply pick up again where we left off. Faced with this crisis, we must reorient things in the right direction.

Has the pandemic changed your visions for the futures of Poitiers and Greater Lyon?

Léonore Moncond'huy: Honestly no, but it confirmed the need to implement our programme more quickly, particularly in relation to food. The threat to food security was

stark and sudden. Our supplies depend on national and international systems that are vulnerable to shocks. So local food systems are not only an ecological issue but also a matter of security.

Bruno Bernard: The crisis has not changed my vision for Greater Lyon, but it has reinforced my conviction of the need to rebalance the relationship with the territories around the metropolitan area. My predecessors developed Greater Lyon to continually become bigger and richer, and to draw in ever-increasing numbers of people. The results were skyrocketing house prices, congestion and pollution, and over-stretched public services. With heatwaves linked to climate change, it was already likely that, over the next 10 to 15 years, disaffection with dense urban areas will grow, whether we like it or not. The Covid-19 crisis is accelerating this dynamic, especially due to remote working. The relationship between large cities and intermediate towns needs to become more balanced.

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The pandemic exposes the link between social, environmental, and health inequalities. How can green policies make cities more inclusive?

Bruno Bernard: Two green policies for social justice stand out. First, the massive development of public transport to allow everyone to get around easily. Not everybody can afford a car and so mobility is an aspect of inequality. Unified pricing across operators will be introduced and, from January 2021, the most disadvantaged will receive free public transport. Second, in January 2023, the metropolitan area will transfer water treatment and supply from private hands to a public authority. This transfer will permit progressive water pricing and free water allowances for people in need.

Léonore Moncond'huy: Public services are key to reconciling ecology and social justice because they are based on the equality of all users. Public services regulate the distribution of resources between people and guarantee access to ecological goods and services at affordable prices. In Poitiers today, buses are seen as a means of transport for the poor. It is up to us, the community, to make sure that they are as attractive as any other means of transport. Changing the way people look at public transport to move beyond the car is a social justice issue.

There is a tendency to see social justice only through the prism of employment. But I want to be part of the political tradition on the Left committed to working less. Free time is a right for all, just like the right to work. Social support services focus on employment but inequality is also reflected in leisure, free time, and holidays. After the lockdown was loosened in June, Poitiers put in place a Holidays for All programme. Children who had been stuck inside for months were given the opportunity to escape Poitiers for a week or a few days. Of course, the crisis makes supporting employment, integrating young people, and

finding innovative solutions, particularly in the social economy, crucial. But social justice goes beyond employment.

What are your main objectives for the term?

Léonore Moncond'huy: The ambition is that our three dimensions of ecology, social justice, and democracy are taken into account in all decision-making. It's hard to sum up our goals in a few words but the markers are mobility, energy, and nature education. By the end of the mandate, all residents should have an alternative to the private car. The city already has a climate-air-energy plan but we will translate it from promises into doing everything possible to reduce the community's carbon impact. Making municipal buildings energy-positive will be an important lever. Nature education is our trademark education policy. It'll require training our teams, redirecting our extracurricular activities, and building an immersive nature education centre.

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Bruno Bernard: Reducing pollution is an important objective that involves transport, insulation, pollution sources such as open wood burning, and the regulation of industry. Greening the metropolitan area and preserving biodiversity are also priorities and we'll launch a major plan to protect pollinators. On housing, Greater Lyon wants to double the current rate to be creating 6000 social housing units per year by the end of the mandate. A pedestrian plan will help calm the streets and improve quality of life. Two hundred and fifty kilometres of express cycle lanes should triple the number of bike trips over the mandate.

Food is another priority. We're aiming for 100 per cent organic and at least 50 per cent local in school catering. Two meals per week will be vegetarian and pupils will always have a vegetarian alternative. The 350 farms in our territory export 95 per cent of their produce outside the metropolitan area and only 7 per cent produce organically. Greater Lyon will work with farms to help them convert to a more locally oriented, organic model, by guaranteeing the purchase of part of their produce, for example. At European level, the new common agricultural policy has to help us move in the right direction.

Ecologists have been singled out for political attacks in France. How do you deal with being demonised as extremists, backwards-looking and irresponsible?

Léonore Moncond'huy: I stay calm and keep my distance. The attacks are cartoonish, but most of all they are out of line with who we are and people realise that. The best answers are actions that change people's lives for the better. Our results will prove that these attacks were misplaced.

Bruno Bernard: The attacks came mainly between the two rounds when our opponents realised our chances of winning. These attacks sometimes came from business interests but, since the election, at the local level, these types of attack have stopped. With my background as a business owner, when I meet local entrepreneurs, they quickly understand

that we can do things together. Not only is the economy compatible with ecology, ecology also gives meaning to economics.

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President Macron mocked ecologists as “Amish” and the justice minister even railed against the “ayatollahs of ecology”.

Bruno Bernard: Today ecology is the most dangerous alternative for those currently in power. That's why we are the target. For the president to speak in such excessive terms to avoid a substantive discussion on 5G, it rather shows how unarmed he is faced with public debate. It damages him more than it affects us. We'll stick to the ideas and proposals that bring about change.

After strong results at the European and municipal elections, what should ecologists focus on to progress further?

Bruno Bernard: We must continue with our project and not let up, because ecology is increasingly popular. But we must build on two essential aspects. First, the better articulation of the political philosophy behind our ideas. It's about restoring meaning. Everyone feels the need to give meaning to their life, their actions, and re-create links with others and the environment. Ecology is a powerful catalyst for these aspirations. Setting up a composter in a building is of course good for the environment but more than anything it creates ties between people living in a shared place. The second element is making clear that ecology is an alternative economic model and not just a sticking plaster. Ecology proposes a model that breaks with the economic policies pursued in France for the past 40 years, by the Right and the Left.

Léonore Moncond'huy: Our movement has to remain open to the rest of society. The Green party has not yet brought together all of the many people who would like to see ecology come to power. We have to continue our effort to talk to everyone. Other challenges are reassuring people on the credibility of our programme and showing that ecology is not limited to the environment. Our solutions are economic, social, and security-related. Leading local communities will demonstrate that ecologists can run policies in all areas; different and yet responsible management will give us credibility.



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Bruno Bernard is president of the Greater Lyon metropolitan area. He was previously in charge of elections and relations with other political parties for the executive board of Europe Écologie Les Verts.



Léonore Moncond'huy is mayor of Poitiers. A member of Europe Écologie Les Verts, she was elected in 2020 as the head of the Poitiers Collectif list.

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