



By Michael Smith

Four years ago I wrote early in Emmanuel Macron's French Presidency that he had shown more leadership than the entire rest of the Western world since his election. "He claims to have found a political path between left and right, has made clear in the most elegant ways his disdain for Trump and has bowed to nobody, least of all Vladimir Putin, in sharing truths about international political thuggery".

I had a go at tracing his philosophic influences largely through Paul Ricoeur of whom he was a protégé. Through Ricoeur essentially Macron is more likely to take an ethical approach, less likely to lie, more likely to keep promises, more likely to seek dialogue, see the other side and understand that two interpretations are possible of an act or situation, to be idealistic and secular.

A good topical example is his role of interlocutor with Russia which bespeaks his willingness to see the other side and both his pragmatism and his idealism. He is touting the Russian perspective but is a friend to Ukraine and has made troops available just in case.

Inevitably with that philosophical underpinning his overall record is dissonant.

Macron has governed to the right of centre though he had promised to be in equal measure right and left of centre. A former investment banker, who scrapped the wealth tax and picked two centre-right prime ministers, he has moaned about the money the state spends on social welfare and does not idealise France's comprehensive welfare state. He has introduced looser labour laws into the rigid French system and he presided over the longest strikes since 1968 driven by his proposed pension reforms. He has been tough on security and Islamist extremism. Nevertheless the *Economist* magazine, not sympathetic on

these matters, has claimed that "Mr Macron has turned into something of a closet socialist".

The most visible evidence of the president channelling his inner Mitterrand is to be found in public spending. When the pandemic struck, Macron undertook to do whatever it took. Since then he spent ten times more last year to keep firms and furloughed workers going than France ever earned in a year from its wealth tax. France was already outspending all the Nordic countries on social programmes, and in indebtedness.

Less noticed is a growing body of progressive rights and rules Mr Macron has also introduced: a doubling of guaranteed paternity leave to four weeks, with one week compulsory; fines for firms that fail to close the gender pay gap.

Internationally he has championed progressive multilateral causes, from a global minimum corporate-tax rate (a Macron pledge in 2017) to vaccines for Africa.

France's centre of political gravity has shifted to the right. This, not the left, is where his toughest competition will come from in April's Presidential election. Macron's nod to the left is studiously mild by French class-warrior standards, and in line with his intellectual roots.

Not surprisingly his policy mix works quite well in practice, even if not in theory.

Macron is much more philosophical than any other European leader, contrasting with a long-standing Irish weakness. His thinking, if he wins a second term, may drive the future of the EU. It centres on strength especially globally, on creating a community not a market, on tackling extremism and selfish nationalism and on indulging the disaffected centrist middle classes.

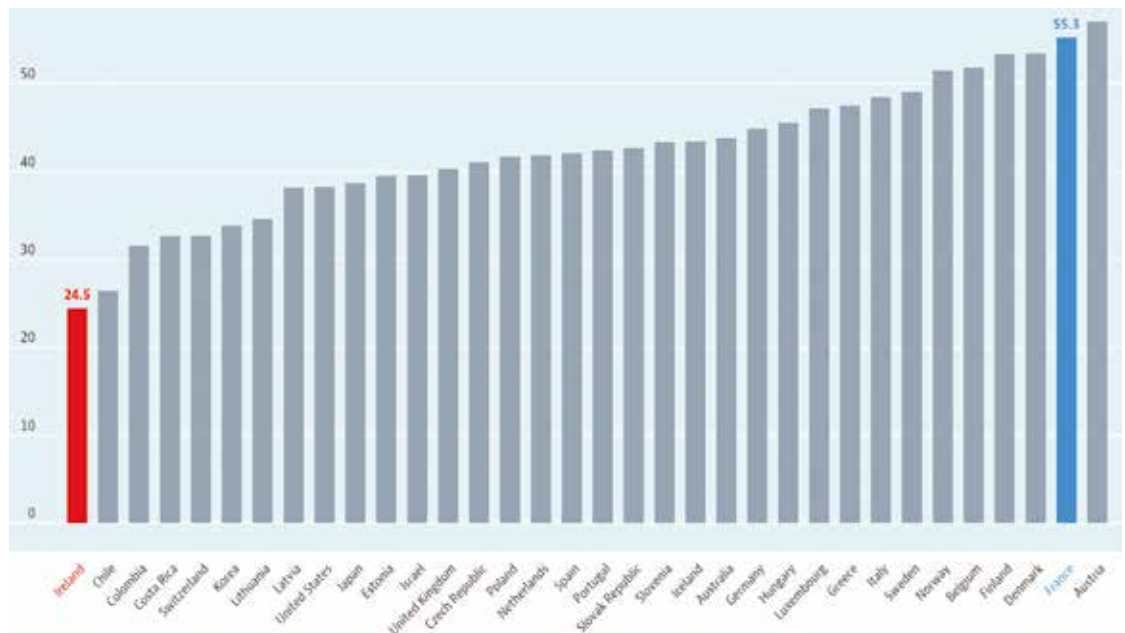
And whether or not Ireland likes it, on convergence.

Two years ago this is what he told the *Economist* about Europe:

"So, firstly, Europe is gradually losing track of its history... Europe has forgotten that it is a community, by increasingly thinking of itself as a market, with expansion as its end purpose. This is a fundamental mistake, because it has reduced the political scope of its project, essentially since the 1990s. A market is not a community. A community is stronger: it has notions of solidarity, of convergence, which we've lost, and of political thought. Secondly, a change in American strategy is taking place; thirdly, the rebalancing of the world goes hand in hand with the rise—over the last 15 years—of China as a power, which creates the risk of bipolarisation and clearly marginalises Europe. And add to the risk of a United States/China "G2" the re-emergence of authoritarian powers on the fringes of Europe, which also weakens us very significantly.

Finally, added to all this we have an internal European crisis: an economic, social, moral and political crisis that began ten years ago. Europe hasn't re-lived civil war through armed conflict, but has lived through selfish nationalism. In Europe there has been a north-south divide on economic issues, and east-west on the migration issue, resulting in the resurgence of populism, all over Europe. These two crises—economic and migration—hit the middle classes particularly hard. By raising taxes, by making budgetary adjustments which hurt the middle classes, which I believe was a historic mistake. That's incidentally what lies behind the rise in extremism throughout Europe. A Europe that has become much less easy to govern".

The *Economist* gives Macron an 80% chance of re-election. He has said and done what he thinks. It's good to understand him. History if not ideology is on his side. 🇫🇷



General government spending total, as % of GDP, 2020 or latest available (OECD)