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LE PEN IS MORE THAN "A DETAIL" IN FRENCH POLITICS

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The Front National — Right-Wing Extremist

Volumes of newspaper and magazine copy have been written about Jean-Marie Le Pen and his Front National party, the right-wing extremist group that currently has 33 deputies in the lower house of the French parliament. People view Le Pen from the vantage point of their traditional political homes, their fears and hopes, their involvement with or detachment from issues on which Le Pen dwells. To those on the left, to Jews, other minorities (particularly North Africans) and liberals (in the American sense), Le Pen is a neo-Nazi -- an anti-Semite and a clear and present menace to French democracy and to decency.

To thoughtful people to the right of center, he is a super-patriot who portrays himself as a conservative, but in fact hurts conservatives by drawing votes from them, thus aiding the socialists. Many responsible conservatives also share liberals' and minorities' concerns about Le Pen's extremism and the damage he could do to France's democratic institutions. It is safe to say that to all those, regardless of party affiliation, who believe in French democracy, Le Pen represents a problem and an affront.

Le Pen's hard-core supporters consist of ultra-nationalists, fired up by his denunciation of "foreigners" who "pollute" France's culture; take jobs away from "real" Frenchmen and threaten to

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make France into yet another North African country. Then there is the protest vote that used to go to the now enfeebled Communist party, which has become an insignificant factor in French politics when once it was the single most powerful party in parliament. Many of these frustrated, unhappy protesters have ironically swung from the deflated communists to the right-wing extremists who make more news and more noise.

Le Pen's Strength May Have Peaked

Early in 1987, while Le Pen seemed to be gaining strength, his and his party's more recent statements and actions have hurt them. It is this observer's view that Le Pen's strength has peaked -- and peaked much too early for the elections which take place in April, 1988. If this assessment is correct, those recent events have speeded the descent: his calling the gas chambers "a detail" of World War II; and a near-riot incited by his deputies in the National Assembly on a Friday night in early October, when many deputies had already returned home to their districts. Le Pen's assembly members turned the voting keys of absent members, took over the rostrum, physically assaulted some of the few deputies of other parties who were still there, and thus lent reality to their image as ruffians with no regard for democratic institutions.

The remark about the gas chambers as "a detail" won Le Pen universal condemnation and triggered a key resignation from his party: that of Olivier d'Ormesson, whose distinguished record and name had meant much to Le Pen. A Le Monde poll of early November, 1987 showed that Le Pen's appeal had dropped from 10 to 7 percent, and the remark about the gas chambers is seen as the major cause of his slide. No doubt it was a factor in the categorical statement by Prime Minister Jacques Chirac before CRIF, the community relations organization of French Jewry, in early November, that his majority coalition rejects outright any alliance with Le Pen's extremist party.

Still, Le Pen and the Front National represent if not a clear and present danger, then a blot on France's political scene, since no other politician of Le Pen's ilk has made as much of a mark in any other Western country in recent years.

The Jewish Reaction

Aside from the immigrants, on whom Le Pen concentrates his fire directly, and who have not yet found as strong and united a voice as more established groups in the nation's politics, Jews react most intuitively and intensely to him. This is sometimes not fully understood by Jews in other countries, especially in the United States. In America, it is possible for a Jewish group to have discussions with right-wing politicians. Although the comparison is not accurate on all counts, let us take the Moral Majority's Jerry Falwell as an example. While Falwell may be controversial among American Jews, Le Pen is beyond the pale to French Jews. Some American Jews feel that, like Falwell, Le Pen is strongly pro-Israel, and his party's major targets are the Arab world and the Soviet Union -- both adversaries of the Jewish state, and that therefore he should not be dismissed out of hand.

On the other hand, an Anti-Defamation League report published in the ADL Bulletin in October, 1986, said: "Its (the National Front's) opponents have called the party racist, fascist and anti-Semitic. Party publications have expressed racist and anti-Semitic viewpoints and some National Front leaders have Nazi or neo-Nazi connections." This assessment remains valid, even though Le Pen tells Jewish and moderate audiences that he opposes anti-Semitism, and that he would throw out anti-Semites among his lieutenants if he found them. His support for Israel is widely seen as grounded in his intense anti-Arab feelings. Israel to Le Pen is a "bastion" against the Arab world, from whence all those foreigners stream into France and "threaten its culture." It

is a rationale that carries absolutely no weight with the leadership and the mainstream of French Jewry.

Strength in the National Assembly

Le Pen's strategy of competing for votes from conservative parties is evident from an analysis last spring in the daily Le Monde, which shows that the Front National had at that time tripled its impact among the deputies of the majority parties in the National Assembly. At the election of officers to the current session of the Assembly, the Front National candidate received 80 first-round votes for a vice presidency of the Assembly, while the party itself has only 33 deputies. In the second round of voting, the Front National candidate increased his total to 100. The comparable figures a year ago were 54 and 45. But chances are that if this balloting were to take place today, Le Pen's party would fare a good deal worse.

What the vote shows is that Le Pen was able to make inroads into the conservative parties by offering deals for votes, and that the decision of who will be the standard bearer in the presidential elections in 1988 on the conservative side could, and still can, be influenced by Le Pen's party.

The fact that there will be at least two conservative candidates gives Le Pen the opportunity to play the game in the waters of the conservative mainstream, and to squeeze out concessions, even though his actual number of deputies under the new electoral law will be sharply reduced. Le Pen does not run to be elected president. He wants to finish a strong third on the first ballot, and then exchange his support for cabinet jobs and legislative actions advancing his party's goals.

Le Pen's Political Platform

Against this background, it is useful to recapitulate relevant components of Le Pen's political program:

1. Send back foreign residents to their home countries and give preference in employment to French citizens.

2. Outlaw representation of workers on company boards, abolish the right to strike in the public sector, and restrict it elsewhere.

3. Only "a Frenchman, head of a family, employed in the private sector," would have the right to hold shares in private companies. Thus, civil servants, self-employed people, and many senior citizens could not own shares.

4. Give preference in economic policy to small, family-run businesses, in opposition to large companies, and "international big business."

5. The party's ideology expresses disdain for "nomadic people" who are not loyal to their country (an old anti-Semitic stereotype), and prefers those "with property, who take roots" in the nation.

Frenchmen vs. Foreigners

The single most important element in the platform is intense nationalism: "Frenchmen" vs. "foreigners." On this point, Jews see their situation linked with those of other minorities, even though official Front National documents may not always spell out the Jewish component. Yet in 1980, the Front National's monthly publication Militant did spell it out when it said: "The Zionist lobby ordered the policy of genocide aimed at annihilating our people (the French people - ed.) by bringing in hordes of stupid alien workers...."

In calling for the expulsion of foreigners, the Front National's documents do not make it clear whether this means all "non-French" people, or only those of non-European descent. But they do call for sending home non-white French citizens -- Asian refugees from Communist-ruled countries, blacks from "communist-backed dictatorships," and North Africans (including Jews) who are not French citizens.

The Front National's ideology becomes most articulate when it defines French national identity, where some of the language is reminiscent of past racist movements. Here are some key quotes from Front National documents: "Any

foreigner can become (a citizen) by a legal, artificial act -- naturalization. But he can only become part of the fatherland (patrie) by a sacrificial act -- giving his blood." Or "France means 4,000 years of European culture, 20 centuries of Christianity, 40 kings and two centuries of Republican government." Or "God and the Church are the pillars of national unity."

In the field of education, the Front National wants to forbid "teaching of foreign cultures and languages of the immigrant minorities." In other contexts, Front National literature defines "foreign culture" as elements unrelated to Christianity.

In this context, it is important to understand that there are sharp differences between traditional parties -- conservatives and socialists (or U.S.-style liberals) -- on policy toward immigrants. Thus a live issue is a (conservative) government-proposed change in the naturalization law that would require children of foreigners born in France to declare explicitly at age 18 whether they want to become citizens and abolish the automatic naturalization that is currently the law.

Many people also resent the heavy influx of immigrants whose customs differ sharply from theirs, and who in the eyes of unemployed Frenchmen constitute unfair competition for scarce jobs. These are concerns that many people feel have not been effectively addressed by either the socialists or the conservatives.

Yet it is a far cry from such concerns to the kind of speech with which Le Pen addressed a rally of his supporters on April 2, 1987: "If you are faithful to France, if you love her, if you adopt her customs and law, her language, her way of thinking, in short if you integrate yourselves completely, we shall not refuse to take you in as part of us.... But if you are true to your own roots (which is something I can respect), if you propose to live according to your own laws, customs and culture, then it would be better if you returned to where you come from, or things will go badly for you."

Le Pen himself, and the literature that describes his party's program, thus make it

clear where the Front National's real commitments lie -- to people with "roots in the soil," that mythical notion that the Nazis called Bodenstaendigkeit. The Front National distrusts and would either expel or make life difficult for all those whose cultural values reflect an ancestry that is not 100 percent French. It is an ideology that has all the earmarks of racist thinking. The recent remark on the gas chambers reflects the influence of the Holocaust revisionists who have gathered in and around the Front National and whose theories fit in with the Front National's thinking.

A Genteel Anti-Semitism

There is a long tradition in France of "genteel" or even not so genteel anti-Semitism, to which the Front National platform appeals. It is therefore not surprising that French Jews and their leaders see professions of support for Israel, or a politically-motivated disavowal by Le Pen of outright anti-Semitism as not very meaningful in light of his party's racist and anti-foreign program. The reaction of French Jews is all the more understandable when they observe Le Pen's strategy to squeeze concessions out of the conservative parties, and thus to exert influence on mainstream French politics.

As matters stood in mid-November, 1987, Le Pen's star was sinking. To those who believe in France's democratic institutions, and to French Jews who see themselves as deeply committed to France, its culture and its language (and this includes the immigrants from North Africa), and who also have a deep attachment to their Judaism and to Israel, a massive defeat of the Front National next spring would be a cause for celebration.

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