A view from France
By David McWilliams

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There's nothing better than a glass of sugary Coca-Cola on a chilly morning after far too many Cote de Rhones to clear the old head. With a week to go, I'm in Paris. I'm going to head south to Marseille. And I'm trying to make some sense of this fascinating presidential election. Now it's Macron versus Le Pen. But it's much more than just these two individuals. It's about two different countries. It's official France versus unofficial France. It's status quo France versus radical France. It's insider France versus outsider France. It's globalisation versus nationalism. It's cosmopolitan versus nativists. And ultimately, it's the EU versus Frexit.

Official France has lined up right behind Macron. All the dominant political players-- the media, the past presidents of both left and right, the main trade unions, university professors, respectable opinion, Le Monde, Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, the European Commission, and even the bond market have all lined up behind your man. These are the insiders.

And this is just the way Marine Le Pen wants it. These are exactly the type of people that she wants to see in front of her in the trenches. To paraphrase Eisenhower's quip about the French army in World War II, Le Pen would rather have official France in front of her than behind her.

Le Pen represents the forgotten France, Le France Perdu, the France you rarely see on TV. The industrial workers who've seen their jobs disappear. The kids in the suburbs who've seen their stake in society evaporate. The petty Bourgeois who feel threatened by immigration. These are the outsiders and these are her people. The election is about the soul of France, the heart of the euro, and the direction of Europe in the next decade. For markets, an upset here would be the biggest disruption to conventional wisdom yet-- far bigger than either Trump or even Brexit.

But on paper, it doesn't look likely. The polls say Macron will win. But who knows.

Now when I say I'm in Paris, I'm in a park in Paris that visitors rarely frequent. I'm sitting in the slightly down at heel cafe, Le Khédive on the Place Victor-Hugo just opposite the basilica in Saint-Denis. We are only a couple of hundred yards away from the street where the Bataclan killers were eventually surrounded by French police in 2015.

This is a very special place. Saint-Denis was the traditional burial place for French kings. It's steeped in French history. It is here in the basilica just behind me in 1492 where Joan of Arc was blessed before marching out to face the English foe.

In terms of France's Catholic history, there are few holier places. But today, Saint-Denis has the largest Muslim population of any arrondissement in Paris. The cathedral is empty, yet the mosque is full.

We're actually only a few miles from the pomp and majesty of the [INAUDIBLE], the Louvre, and the millions that marvel at Paris every year. But this place feels like a world away. You don't see many tourists knocking around this part of the world.

Not only is Saint-Denis home to a burgeoning young Muslim population, it also has the highest number of young African immigrants. The smells, the sounds the colours of this bustling morning market are more Marrakesh than Montmartre. This is the French street. It's also part of forgotten France. But it's deep within metropolitan France. And from this vantage point, it's not difficult to see the deep divisions within the French society.

I'm here to catch up with Lara Marlowe, veteran Irish Times Paris correspondent, to get a sense of the people-- the two individuals behind the presidential runoff.

So who is Marine Le Pen.
She's very much Jean-Marie Le Pen's daughter. Her father founded the Front National in 1972 when he was very, very far to the right. She grew up feeling very persecuted as Jean-Marie Le Pen's daughter. When she was 6 years old, a bomb targeted their apartment building in Paris and she barely escaped with her life.

Marine expelled her father from the National Front in 2015 as part of her attempt to rebrand the party. And although her economic policies are left wing, she wants, for example, to increase social spending and lower the retirement age. Her attitude to immigration and Islam are still uncompromising.

She says the only way Muslims should stay in France is if they adopt French customs and traditions. And she wants to ban, for example, headscarves everywhere in all public places. You be like us, you eat pork, you drink wine, and you show your hair and your flesh. Otherwise, we don't want you.

Macron-- what sort of character is he?

Total opposite of Marine Le Pen.

Where she has all the sharp edges and the thick skin, he is really fine. He is highly educated. Whereas her number one policy-- the thing that she has staked her career, this election on along with anti-immigration and anti-Islam-- is anti-Europe. Macron, again, is the exact opposite. He loves Europe. He wants to strengthen Europe. He wants to relaunch Europe.

If he has a weakness, it's that his policies often seem a bit vague. It's really hard to pin him down on things.

And that, I suppose, is his weakness. He wants to be everything to everyone. And even if he wins now, it could simply be postponing the real battle because the French economy is not performing for the young.

Over 25% of young French people are out of work. And as a result, significantly, the National Front could be the party of the future. Because it is by far the most popular party in France for young people between the ages of 18 and 24.

Now this is most unusual. Normally, the right wing is popular amongst the old. But not here in France.

Now I'm in the heart of official France, at Place de l'Opera, to talk to Geraldine Amiel, Bloomberg's Paris bureau chief.

Le Pen is using unemployment and the economy to bolster her campaign. Why is this?

Well, French unemployment rate is something between 9.5% and 10% of the workforce. This is huge and it's been going on for awhile. She's offering a simple solution. Let's close the borders. Let's get out of the euro. Let's kick out foreigners. And then mathematically, we'll get more jobs for French people. So simple solutions for what is actually a complex problem. So she's riding high on this one.

But at the same time, she's also shooting herself in the foot. The anti-euro argument is not working with the French. Three French out of four are in favour of the euro. When she says she wants to remove France out of the euro area, she's also saying to all the people who are saving in France-- and there's a lot of them-- your savings value out of the euro will be lower. It will be like at least 20% to 30% lower.

Same for those who have a loan. It means that their loan will be 30% higher than what it's worth currently. She keeps saying, no, I won't do it immediately. There will be a referendum. I won't do this without the French people. There will be a process. We will be gradual.

Still, what people understand is that if we are out of the euro, it's going to be chaos. There is going to be a bank run.

So we've kind of heard this before, haven't we? The official mainstream predicting financial armageddon if voters vote for the outsider. So is this project fear again? But then again, both sides are using fear in the last week. Le Pen is stoking up the fear of immigrants, fundamental Islam, and terrorism to heighten the outsider's anxiety, which is already acute due to economic insecurity. So let's get out of Paris and head south in a TGV, the pride of French engineering, to Marseilles, France's second city, and talk to the National Front themselves.

So I met the General Secretary of the National Front and I asked Nicolas Bay, is the National Front a racist party as many people suggest?

I answered him that this is wrong. This is completely wrong. We've never discriminated against people on the basis of the colour of their skin or their religion. For us, there's only one criteria-- the national community.

Today in France, we can't put up with letting 200,000 people into our country every year. Tens of thousands of immigrants come to our territory every year. We have in France six million unemployed people and 9 million poor
people. We can't deal with this amount of immigration. We're not racist. Our opponents try to caricature our position sometimes.

So tell me about your policy on the euro. It seems you want France to leave the euro.

Not exactly. Our project is to totally renegotiate the organisation of the EU and the political direction of the EU. This EU doesn't serve the people's interests. We were promised growth, employment, and security. We've got massive unemployment, social breakdown, massive immigration, and insecurity.

As for the euro, we plan to negotiate on this. Today, the euro is a currency that harms our economy. It is way overvalued and serves the interests of Germany to the detriment of other members of the eurozone.

But official France under Macron isn't having any of this radical talk. After all, for the past 60 years, France has really been the soul of the European project. And abandoning the euro now would be kind of inconceivable and for many people, dangerous. But apart from upholding the status quo and this division between official and forgotten France, what else does Macron stand for?

So to find out a bit more about this guy, I've tracked down Macron's main spokesperson, Laurence Haim. Before the campaign, Laurence was one of the best known journalists in France. She was White House correspondent, featuring almost nightly on French TV. But she caused a big stir in the media when she jacked it all in to work for Macron's new party, En Marche!

It's a movement. It's not a traditional political party. It's a movement which has more than 230,000 people who believe in change. We want to do something for France.

So how exactly will Macron deal with the fact that many, many millions of French people are uneasy about immigration right now?

It's an easy political argument-- immigration, racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism. And we saw that in France. And we're seeing that again. Our adversary and especially the National Front is playing with the fear of the middle class. We want to make sure that we have an adequate answer regarding the fear of the middle class. And we are trying to explain to the people, to the middle class, but also to the people who are walking-- the walkers-- that please, just don't listen to simplicity. Listen to us. Believe in us.

And his views in the EU?

He believes in a strong Europe. He wants to make sure that as soon as he is going to be elected president, he will do some something with Germany to strengthen the relationship between France and Germany. And he will make sure that very quickly, there is a normalization on key issues between all the European people. Like defence, education, probably fiscality. And that's really important for him.

So let's talk about Brexit. How does Macron view the next two years with the British?

Huh. He said that to Theresa May, when he met her, he will be cautious and he will make sure that he understands the importance of Brexit. And that he will make sure that France is protected.

And obviously, protecting France, in his view, means protecting Europe. So for the Brits, this may well be the guy who insists on that big divorce bill before the Brexit talks start. Remember, the French president never lost a point in the polls by kicking the Brits.

Ultimately though, even if he wins-- and that looks likely-- forgotten France isn't going away. He will still have to get the economy going. And this will mean facing down the trade unions, which is never easy for a president, even with a big majority-- never mind a president who has no political power base in the parliament. And because he has no party base, he will have to make deals and involve compromises.

In short, without a strong embedded party, his power will have to be rented as he tries to create political coalitions to get measures through. This is a massive challenge.

There is a real chance that he wins on Sunday. But he may find himself isolated in the Palace just when he needs to drag the French economy around and make the outsiders feel less isolated. He might find himself emasculated rather than emboldened by power. And all the while at the gates, forgotten, unofficial, outsider France is looking in, locked out, and seething.

So this week, the presidential outcome may well be definitive. But ultimately, the battle for the hearts, the minds, and the soul of France has only just begun.