

French Politics: Are the Centre-Right Conservatives Still Economic Liberals?

By [William Harrison](#)

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There is something strange going on in the French senate. Ideological disorientation has taken hold. The centre-right Les Républicains, and the Parti Socialiste, of the centre-left, have somehow found themselves on the same side, contending with a cabinet-backed business and privatisation draft law. For the socialists, this is business as usual. However, for the former-UMP party Republicans, headed in the senate by Bruno Retailleau, this position seems to demand answers. Is there not a conflict between their traditional core values and the inexplicable course they now find themselves on?

The item in question is the [Loi PACTE](#), proffered by Macron's minister for the economy, Bruno Le Maire. The draft law aims to smooth the financial and bureaucratic burden for small and medium businesses. Along with a number of other shake-ups relating to employee-company involvement and bureaucratic processes, there is the promotion of a new enterprise ethos requirement for companies.

The aim is "to have companies that have the kidneys strong enough to innovate and export," and to have employees "more involved in the march of companies," Le Maire has [said](#).

The most contentious aspect of the draft law, however, has been the article pertaining to free up €10 billion to fund an expansive business innovation project. This requires the privatisation, among others, of Aéroport de Paris (ADP), the company responsible for the commercial operation of Roissy and Orly airports. In order to make this sale of shares, the law which prevents the state from falling below 50% control in such companies must be changed.

"It is essential to redefine the place of the state in our economy. Do we wish for a State that contents itself with receiving dividends, or a state-strategist who prepares for the future?" Le Maire [explained](#). "We will make these operations of disposals of assets as soon as the law is passed and the market conditions are met."

Macron's En Marche party dominate the national assembly, the lower house. As such the draft passed there on first reading in October, with 361 votes for, and only 84 against. It is the national assembly which will have the last word. In spite of this, in the Republican controlled senate, Bruno Retailleau, leader of the centre-right party, has baffled many by joining his forces with those of his traditional socialist adversaries in order to [decry the Loi PACTE](#).

“I am a liberal, (but) I consider that to privatize a monopoly is to unduly give a financial income to the private sector.” Painting comparisons with the privatisation of highways, he said “We sold the family jewels, we made a coup, and then nothing (...) the privatisation of highways has not been a good thing.”

Currently, ADP generates about €160 million a year in revenue for the state. His argument circles around the idea that relinquishing this would apparently not be in the public interest, in spite of the large cash injection it would provide at a time when the country needs it most.

Le Maire [responded](#) that he believed the comparison to be a hasty false equivalency, and that they would not make “the same mistakes” as with the highways in 2006. He continued by saying that the government plans to maintain a higher degree of control over the situation by ensuring that “the regulatory framework will be stricter after this operation.” However, he said that it was not the role of the state “to manage hotels and luxury shops of the ADP group. This is not my conception of the state.”

It might seem bewildering that Bruno Retailleau and his party are opposed to such privatisation when one considers the historical actions of their political ancestors.

From 1981, the government of Jacques Chirac, father of the UMP, [launched several actions of privatisation](#). These included the partial privatisation of Saint-Gobain, CGE, Havas, TF1 and Suez, as well as the Paribas banks, BTP, BIMP, CCF, and Société Générale. Additionally, his government sold the national telecom company (CGCT) and the Mutuelle Général Français health insurance provider. Ultimately, this brought the state the equivalent of about 13 billion euros.

It was Chirac’s successor, leader of the UMP between 2004 to 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy who brought about the [removal of the inheritance tax](#) as well as the [privatisation of the universities through the Law LRU](#). During his sitting presidency in 2007 the controversial politician gave financial autonomy to universities so that the government could set aside the heavy cost of supporting them. In spite of the unrest caused by this move, it was likely only the financial crisis that prevented the viability of further privatisation under the then centre-right government.

Yet more recently, candidate François Fillon of the 2016 presidential race ran as the economic liberal nominee. A man who throughout his career has openly pushed for the relaxation of corporate taxation in order to stimulate commercial investment. A Republican who sought the shrinking of the state and the opening up of the private sector.

When Mr Retailleau [says](#) “We will oppose the privatisation of the ADP,” it is almost as if he and his deputies oppose their own political vision and that of their predecessors. The centre-right in French politics has for a long time been understood by its adherence to economic liberalism. This ideology has arguably underpinned the centre-right’s identity since the founding of the fifth republic. The fact that Bruno Retailleau and his supporters seem to be abandoning this fundamental component of their party doctrine is an indication of how deeply their uncertainty runs, and it must, in part, be ascribed to the disruptive emergence of En Marche itself.

Without a clear sense of the position of Macron’s centre line government, the Republicans, seemingly startled, have dived left when they should have perhaps dived right. That is to

say, if one assumes that maintaining authentic principles has already been abandoned altogether. At this stage, it would probably surprise very few people if Mr Retailleau were to come out and admit publicly that he too was confused by the disembodied socialist's voice now producing itself from his throat.

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William Harrison is currently a doctoral student in global economics and international relations. His main fields of interest are new technologies, globalization, security and the environment.

Featured image: Bruno Le Maire (Source: Ambassade de France aux Emirats Arabes Unis)

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