

INTERVIEW

From the dissolution of the National Assembly to the creation of the New Popular Front - “It’s time to stand together”

A look at our history

Wednesday 17 July 2024, by [BESANCENOT Olivier](#), [FLEY Anaïs](#) (Date first published: 27 June 2024).

Olivier Besancenot, spokesperson for France’s Nouveau parti anticapitaliste (NPA), spoke to Anaïs Fley on 27 June 2024 on the current political situation in the country (before the second round of parliamentary elections on 7 July 2024 at which the Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP) emerged as the largest parliamentary bloc).



Olivier Besancenot (NPA)

Anaïs Fley - Was Macron’s decision to dissolve the National Assembly a folly or a political calculation?

Olivier Besancenot - You could say it was a mad political calculation. That’s what institutional political crises are all about: when there’s a major political crisis like this one, centrifugal forces feed on themselves. These forces may know, as Macron does, that they’re going up against a wall, but they’re going in happily. I don’t know whether his calculation is to play on a political crisis that could benefit him now, or to play the card of cohabitation with the Rassemblement national (RN) that could benefit his camp or himself later.

In any case, the political choice is to dissolve the government now. At the time of the pension reform, we all half imagined that political dissolution was objectively on the cards. It wasn’t just the use of 49-3. [1] With the motion of censure, we realised that in reality they did not have a majority, even in Parliament. If he had dissolved the Assembly at that point, it’s clear that the political choice and the electoral result would not have been the same. So there is a political choice on his part: to do it later, in a specific context, where he knows it will favour the far right. Basically, he is making the political choice to put the keys to a large part of the state apparatus in the hands of the RN.

What's your response to the claim that "we've never tried the far right"?

It's beyond me. If you have to try a deadly poison at all costs to be sure it's deadly, that escapes me. On the other hand, it has already been tried: in the long history, in the short history, in the municipalities... We've seen what it does in terms of censorship, withdrawal of subsidies from cultural associations, associations defending women's rights. In Europe, we know what it's like with the different governments that have implemented the policies we know.

And the long story! You can look at it any way you like, this political current is not quite the same as its ancestors, but it is the heir to a political current and it is guilty of that history. I think that for a long time we underestimated, even on the left, the fact that there is a fascism that is French in the true sense of the word. We kept the idea that fascism in France was a foreign product that was imposed on us at the time of the collaboration, through the Nazi occupation, under the Vichy regime, forgetting that in reality there is a specific type of French fascism, which is probably as old as the French Revolution, or in any case as old as French counter-revolutionary ideas. They are nevertheless deeply rooted in a part of the authoritarian and conservative right.

People have forgotten - or pretended to forget - that political anti-Semitism was born in France with the Dreyfus affair, in the ranks of the nationalist, conservative, not to say monarchist, right. So it has nothing to do with the "Islamist-leftists"! What's more, we've forgotten that the theory of race was first developed in France by Gobineau, as part of France's "republican" colonial history.

These ideas later inspired the Nazi regime. If you look closely, even historically, it was this current, remodelled and recomposed, which took over during the Occupation, and which often anticipated many of the demands that the German occupiers didn't even make of them. This trend had never disappeared, and it is now re-emerging. I think we may be paying for that too.

To talk about more recent history: you were there in 2002, the first time a Le Pen came close to coming to power. What has changed since then?

What has changed is that part of Le Pen's programme was implemented even before his daughter was elected, the Immigration Law being the latest prime example. And then what's changed is obviously the trivialisation, the de-demonisation taken to extremes, which is even more than de-demonisation: we've reached the ultimate project of the far right, which is to demonise the left. Not just the far left or the radical left, but the entire labour movement.

We're really in a situation that corresponds to the Orwellian aberration of his book 1984, with the slogans of the Ministry of Truth: "War is peace", "Ignorance is strength", "Freedom is slavery"... Today, it's like that: everything is turned on its head. Immigrants, by their very presence, are responsible for racism. Women, through their excessive actions, are responsible for sexism. The unemployed are responsible for unemployment. Capitalists, on the other hand, are responsible for nothing, except possibly for trickle-down, i.e. a form of distribution, and we owe them everything. And, to cap it all, the far right is anti-racist and the left is anti-Semitic. What has changed is the culmination of this radicalisation on the right.

And there's one final point: up until 2002, there was still the culmination of activist work, which had been going on since the end of the 1980s, where young people in particular were being taught, by young people themselves - it wasn't taught in schools - how to fight the far right, on the basis of morality and history. That was 2002. And afterwards, a bit of music began to play on the left, on the theme that you can't fight the far right simply in the name of morality and history. Which is true, but as a result we gave up. We're paying the price. Today, we have generations who say "History is so far away". It's true that the thread is broken. I think we're also paying part of the price.

And in this political landscape, we got rid of Hollande, and now we have to deal with him again. How does that make you feel?

It inspires me to do two things. Firstly, that we have to use violence. We have no choice but to use violence. We're in the Popular Front, which is really something new in terms of our political history. It was far from a foregone conclusion, but an exceptional situation calls for an exceptional response. We're in a long phase of reconstituting a new emancipation movement, with the aim, I believe, of constituting a new organisational pole which is anti-capitalist, internationalist, which doesn't seek to separate itself from the rest of the emancipation movement but to be as useful as possible, and to go beyond the existing organisations, including our own.

In this context, we need to be united and revive the traditions of past generations, far away, who were even more violent than us. For example, in the debates of the Communist International in 1922-1923, at a time when the German revolution was in decline, the German revolutionaries felt that we were no longer riding on a propulsive wave and that we had to restore the proletariat's confidence, one way or another. So there was this proposal for a united front, i.e. German communists addressing German Social Democracy. But in 1922-1923, German Social Democracy was only 2 or 3 years after the assassination of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, and they were responsible for it. So we have to do something dramatic.

And if Hollande is obliged to come back, it also means that, in spite of everything, and this is the paradox, things are tending to go to the left. If you look at the programme that's been adopted, it's not a revolutionary programme, it's not even a radical reformist programme, but hey: to cut a long story short, I think Hollande is more uncomfortable with that programme than Philippe Poutou.

You were behind the creation of the NPA some fifteen years ago. What lessons have you drawn from the NPA's activities over that period?

That we held on, in our own way, but that it didn't work. I'm at a point in my life where, when you're up against the wall, faced with the situation you're in, you have to admit your mistakes. And so you have to do some introspective work as an activist and politician. Sometimes we were sectarian - well, I was, I think. After that, it's a question not of blaming ourselves but of what it means.

But it's to our credit that we have maintained a strong programmatic and strategic content, in our independence - sometimes a little daring, sometimes a little sectarian - on questions of property, the distribution of wealth, constant and marked internationalism. And then, a certain need for an open Marxism. I think that, in a small way, this has contributed to something, and that we'll need it to develop a new project. I think that our organisations have largely lived on. Now, in July, we're in a phase where the situation is going to change radically, in any case.

Whether the Popular Front wins, whether it's an intermediate situation, or whether the RN comes to power: we're going to have to be active, to continue to act in a period that we hadn't foreseen, in a situation of continuing crisis. We're all going to have to find ways to rise above, to unite. And in this period, your generation has a particular responsibility. We're trying to pass on to you everything we inherited and all the stupid things we did, so that we don't do them again.

A few weeks ago, you had a chat with Jean Batou, about the new anti-fascist and internationalist issues. Why, when history is being made now, are we still interested in discussing, debating and reflecting on the revolutionaries of the last century?

We're living in a period of total crisis and transition between the old world that's dying and the new one that's slow to emerge, to use Gramsci's words. A friend and comrade, Daniel Bensaïd, who was a

philosopher and a militant, used to say in these situations: "You have to go back to Marx". And I think we need to go back to Marx, understood as an open Marxism that argues with itself, that seeks to renew and reinvent itself.

Trotsky is one of the heirs of the Marxist current, with its errors - there is a part of Trotsky's life and thought that I share, a part that I share less, a part that I am rediscovering. In particular his vision of the rise of fascism and the need for a united workers' front. He wrote some texts in 1931 that were, unfortunately, prophetic, in which he criticised the sectarianism of the leadership of the German Communist Party, which at that time refused to unite with social democracy. This was what we call the Third Period, which lasted from 1928 to 1932-1933, when the CP leadership thought that the main enemy was social democracy and was therefore capable of taking joint action with the Nazis against social-democratic meetings.

He says "no". He says: "Between someone who poisons me in small doses and someone who wants to shoot me in the back, I'm prepared to ally myself with the devil and his grandmother, but without ever tying my hands". It's not a question of adopting models, but I think we need to draw on the great historical references to see what kind of strategic questions we're asking now. Because that's also what we've been dying of: abandoning strategic issues to the far right, which has done its job in its own camp.

You were talking about my generation. If you could warn a young left-wing activist, what would you say is the most worrying danger today?

Those who give advice (laughs). I don't have any advice to give, and you have to be wary of that. Your generation has to make its own experience. The only thing I can say is that it's not a sprint. Activism is a long-distance race. You mustn't exhaust yourself. This is a long-term battle. Activism is about highs and lows, but there are more lows than highs in this case, and it's precisely in the low periods that you need to hold on. Not to hold on for the sake of holding on, but to bounce back. So you have to catch your breath.

And what gives you hope for a better future today?

Young people. The night rallies we've had, with several thousand young people saying "Fuck the Front National", I tell myself that it's not dead. It's not the same waters as 2002, but something is happening. I think that the intuitive revolt of a section of young people, in the suburbs, educated, hard-working, who can't stand injustice and never will, whether it's against sexism, racism, the ecological crisis or fascism, can't be taught.

It's also a long history that creates the conditions that allow some young people to look us in the eye and say: "We're here to turn the tables, so if you're tired, leave us the room". But we mustn't indulge in demagoguery, we need all the different experiences to be able to mingle, to listen to each other, to understand that there is something new to be invented. And that's going to be hard. Whatever happens, it's going to be difficult, so now's the time to hold on. To hold together. You can't decree that, but it's precisely at the ebb that you have to hold on. In July, it won't be the same music. Right now, you can feel the momentum. Even locally, there's some great stuff happening in the campaign.

You've got some crazy things going on, groups of people coming together, people who aren't even organised... The more you look at the political apparatuses, the more you realise that it wouldn't have been a bad idea to keep the left-wing leaders in political confinement until the elections. Just learning to keep quiet for a fortnight is no mean feat. Unfortunately, that's not the case.

The formation of the Popular Front was seen as a bit of a miracle that was no longer

expected, following the dissolution of the National Assembly. Of course, the social movement, feminists, trade unionists and so on were involved in the campaign, but don't you think that the popular classes had a rather external relationship with the New Popular Front?

I'd say there are both, it's contradictory as always. A political situation is never chemically pure, and when you're in crisis that's even truer. On the one hand, it's not a left-wing cartel. We were dependent on that: I'm obliged to say that I was relieved when they came to an agreement in the negotiations of the leaderships - which we never took part in, we weren't invited, and in the end it's not a big deal - because if they hadn't come to an agreement it would have been all over anyway. But at the same time, if that's all it comes down to, it smells of mothballs right from the start.

And from the outset, there was more to it than that. First of all, the collectives said "We support the Popular Front". When Attac does it, when Tsedek does it, when we do it, in reality nobody asks us anything! In spite of everything, there's a logic that forces the parties to know that they've done something, but that it's not NUPES 2. It was a bit like that with pensions: the inter-union coordination set the tempo, the mobilisation went beyond that, but at the same time, it didn't get involved to the point of putting pressure on the coordination and imposing a different timetable for action. So, as always, we're in the middle.

And how do you apply pressure?

It's a bit too early to say, because it all happened very quickly. But I think that all the hard work we've been doing for years, it wasn't spectacular, but people got to know each other. It wasn't easy. I could take a thousand examples: even the fact that we talk, it's stupid but it's also the translation of that. I'm not saying that we didn't have discussions at the time, but the whole campaign around Adama by Assa, with meetings and assemblies that were often improbable, between neighbourhood activists, trade unionists, LGBTI activists, or even collectives fighting transphobia in the pensions movement, behind trade union marches... Frankly, ten years ago it was more than improbable.

In fact, what I see locally, when Philippe [Poutou] says that there are PS teams campaigning for him in the Aude, is that these are people who have been waiting for just one thing for a long time: to work together. And they couldn't do it, or couldn't do it like this. Here, we're investing in a framework that's certainly shaky, but we're all investing in it. Without illusions, without the idea of keeping quiet: it's not a question of giving a blank cheque to those on the left who are responsible for the situation, because when they were in power they pursued right-wing policies! The opposite has never happened; we've never had a right-wing government that pursued a left-wing policy.

But here's the thing. For us, it was... We're very small now, but it was unanimous to join the Popular Front. We don't realise it, but it's historic for us! We've got a new world ahead of us, one of transition, and it's going to be a complicated one.

The solution lies with young people, so that the older generations, like ours, can give the current generations the chance to experience what it's like and overcome the quarrels and sectarianism. It's not a pious appeal, there are disagreements, and when there are we have to admit them, debate them, even when we know that the debate won't resolve them. But admit that they exist, because there's nothing worse than sweeping it all under the carpet.

That's what the left was all about: either we kill each other or we agree on everything at once. Are you sure the PS is really in favour of retirement at 60? Of course they're still not in favour of retirement at 60. It's an illusion, and it would be counter-productive to pretend otherwise.

In any case, if the Popular Front managed to win, to apply even one tenth of this programme, the world would come down on us! So the question that will immediately arise is: are you going to fall flat on your face or are you going to stand firm?

If you stand your ground, it's the balance of power. And the balance of power, it won't just be the words of this or that best 'prime minister' that will change anything: it will be the real balance of power. And that will shed new light on political discussions on the left, in the light of the class struggle.

P.S.

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