

For France (and Europe) a Final Countdown

The war cries coming from enemies of the plan put forward by French Prime Minister Michel Barnier for a first tentative straightening out of France's perilous financial situation are reminiscent of Samson's "Let me die with the Philistines!" (Judges 16:30). If France fails to get a grip on its deficit and public debt, the consequences will be paid by the voters of both leftist and rightist parties, which are trying – albeit separately – to bring down the Barnier government and, above all, to derail its recovery plan.

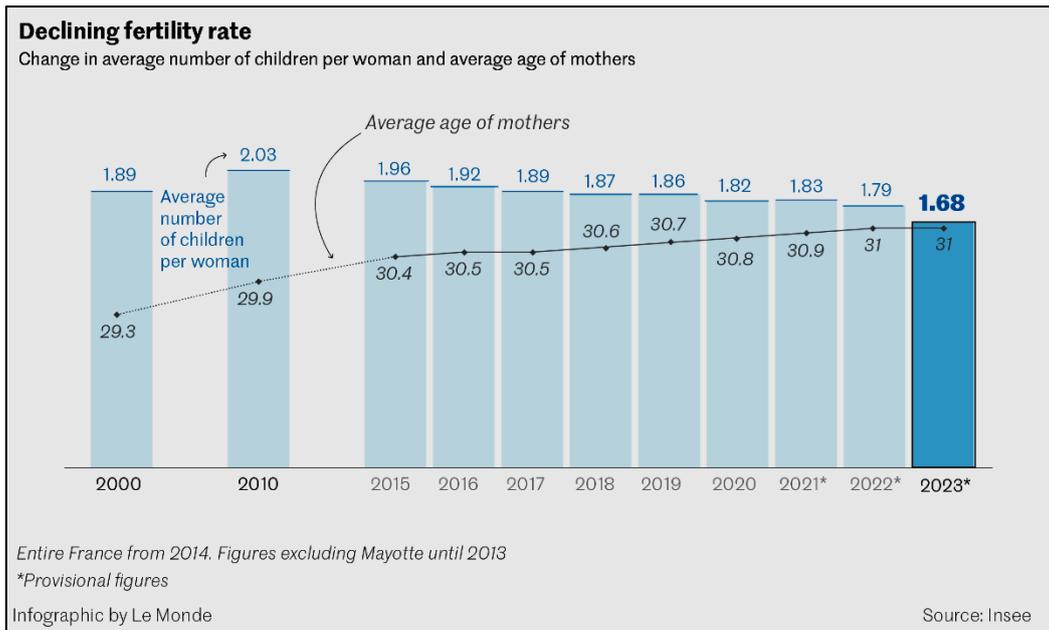
What is surprising is that anyone could be surprised at what is happening. The parliamentary bazaar of December 2 was the almost inevitable manifestation of the sum of a long and also a very long trends and of a shorter, decidedly petty, trend going on since the National Assembly was dissolved last June 9.

The long and very long trends consist in attempting to resolve any issue by covering it with public money. The public schools no longer work, and fuel discrimination and inequality? Let's give more money to the teachers. The farmers are protesting because they say environmental protection measures make their lives harder? Give more money to the farmers. Industry X is doing badly and facing bankruptcy? Here's more money for industry X. Are domestic violence cases spiraling out of control? Let's give more money to police and psychological support groups. And so on.

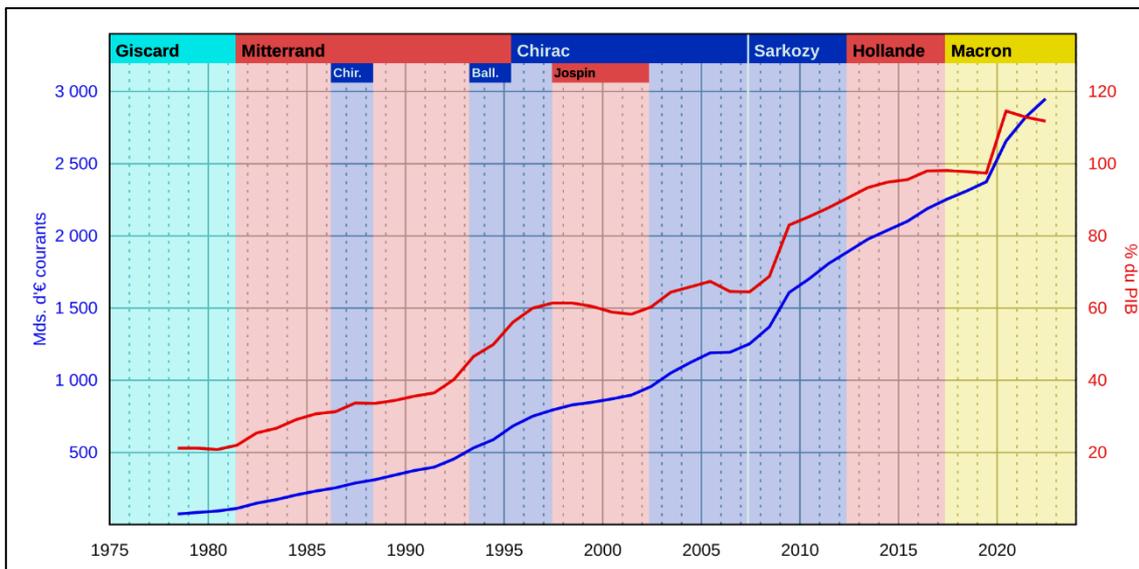
In order not to upset the social order, all problems, from the biggest to the smallest, have been addressed by injecting public money. What is the Rassemblement National (formerly the National Front) asking Barnier for today? More money for pensioners -- and this despite the fact that, in France, pensioners are among the most protected categories: *Le Monde* calculates that if retirees were to receive what they paid in contributions during their working age, they would be getting 30 to 50 percent less than they do now. Nor is this surprising, considering that one in three registered voters is a pensioner, but among actual voters it is one in two.

This is just one example, but a significant one in a country in which fertility rates are falling faster than elsewhere: that rate has fallen from 2.03 children per woman in 2010 (the highest rate among older industrialized countries), to 1.68 in 2023, according to the INSEE Institute of Statistics (see chart).

As France and other countries continue to wage war on immigrants, the burden of maintaining pensioners falls increasingly on the dwindling number of those who work. A 2010 study from INSEE shows that in 2007 there were 86 people of "inactive age" per 100 of "active age" in France, but a reversal is expected by 2035, with the inactive (114) outnumbering the active (100). However, the demographic situation has meanwhile worsened more than expected, so this ratio likely will worsen as well. The likely result: generational compromise at risk, and increasing ageism.



The long- and very long-term trend of systematic recourse to government spending to deal with any problem – a trend which began at the end of the *Trente Glorieuses*, the thirty years of the post-war economic miracle – is thus clear, and can be better seen in the graph below:



Public debt in billions (blue line) and as a percentage of GDP (red line), 1975-2023.
 Top: Presidents of the republic. Background colors represent incumbent governments (blue: right; pink: left; yellow: Macron) © Amrcmln – Wikipedia

Added to this major trend are the petty trends set in motion with the dissolution of the French parliament after the European elections. If future historians feel like digging through the archives to find out what triggered the final phase of France's mid-2020s downfall, perhaps they will understand why Emmanuel Macron dissolved the National Assembly on June 9, 2024. Among the various hypotheses being advanced, the least mean-spirited is that Macron wanted to strengthen his relative majority to prepare for the almost inevitable Peronist assault on the 2025

finance bill. In light of the electoral catastrophe in the June 9 European elections, it is unclear what superstitious speculation could have given rise to the idea of strengthening Macron's party in a fortnight. However, if a bet there was, it was evidently lost, and lost badly.

Yet another hypothesis is circulating: that the Machiavellian French president, knowing full well that the far right would overwhelmingly win the general elections, sent Barnier to the slaughter in order to force the Rassemblement National to join. If not the government, then at least the majority at a later date (i.e., today). This possibility cannot be ruled out, but the idea of such a contrived and slow-evolving design seems closer to imagination than to reality.

The outcome, however, is now there for all to see. The French political crisis will only exacerbate the economic crisis, which will spill over into the political crisis, aggravating it in turn. And this is a political crisis more serious than the German one, at least as far as parliamentary balances are concerned. In Germany, the February 2025 elections are expected to enshrine the victory of the center right, and whatever the outcome, the solution of a new *Große Koalition* is always at hand (at least for now). In France, as we have seen, coalitions are taboo, and the grander they are, the more taboo they are.

The world might view France's self-sabotage with a certain amused detachment: you have always lectured others and now you don't know which way to turn yourself. But the fact is, among the Philistines in danger of dying under the rubble of Samson-France, the Europeans, and then the rest of the world, stand at the forefront.

The two pillars on which the European project are both mired in a deep crisis, and not just a political or economic crisis, but a strategic crisis. Amid their self-obsessed navel-gazing and begging for money, the French are losing their geopolitical strongholds one after another: in Africa, *la boucle est bouclée*, the circle is closing, with the French military being expelled from Chad (where Macron futilely expended unconditional support for father-and-son dictators) and even from Senegal, long considered the most loyal country among the former Paris colonies. New Caledonia, the small archipelago off Australia's eastern coast, is in line to become the next deserter, which would put an end to the fictitious (but so far politically profitable) notion of a France as a "Pacific power."

Germany, for its part, no longer knows whether to place its hope in Washington, Beijing or Moscow; until yesterday there were those who had hoped for Paris, or at least for the fanciful project of "strategic autonomy." Today, the French coin is severely devalued. And its devaluation, has dragged down the euro, the German jewel in the crown -- one more affront among the many that Paris and Berlin have been exchanging in recent times.

And therein lies the most serious problem. Not only are Germany and France increasingly weak, politically and economically, and confused strategically; they are also increasingly distant from each other. From energy issues to the war in Ukraine, everything is a cause for disagreement; most dangerous, because the disagreement is irremediable, is the relationship with the world market. To put it bluntly: France is the leader of protectionism while Germany is the leader of the free market.

The French parliament, transformed on December 2 into a rowdy Roman arena with Barnier acting as gladiator, had acted in rare and composed unanimity a few days earlier in rejecting the Mercosur treaty with several South American countries, ardently supported by Berlin. France's

right, far right, left, far left, and center: all supported the protectionist cause of the 416,436 French farmers (2020 census) paid by the European Union, against what is perhaps one of the last free-trade treaties ready to be implemented before the impending US-inspired tariff war becomes widespread.

For the French, the dispute is entirely Germany's fault, with its mania for debt containment; and for the Germans, it's entirely France's fault, with its mania for spending, backed by a certainty that they, the Germans, will pick up the pieces anyway. Just like in the good old days of hereditary enemies who fought three wars in seventy years, two of which devolved into world wars. Another myth – that Europe would bring peace once and for all between the two banks of the Rhine – is beginning to show its first cracks.

The French and German crises, and the increasingly acute disagreements between the two countries, are driving Europe to the edge of the precipice. Despite a somewhat stunted coalition, Ursula von der Leyen may still dream that she and her European Commission will be the savior of Europe. Well, one of the few certainties in the weeks and months ahead is that she will not succeed. France invented the European Community, and co-opted defeated Germany in order to finally succeed where Louis XIV and Napoleon had failed. Without France and Germany, Europe cannot exist, and it cannot rely on a supposedly *super partes* Commission to make up for it, simply because *super partes* it is not.

The height of paradox is that even as France seems determined to sink itself, causing the entire European edifice to wobble perilously, demonstrations in Georgia in favor of EU membership are multiplying. Following the news these days is like watching a play written by a schizophrenic scriptwriter. Be it Georgia, Ukraine, or even Albania or Serbia: anyone hoping today to get out of their problems by relying on the European Union needs to redo their calculations -- not least because the European Union cannot count on anyone else to help it out of its problems.

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