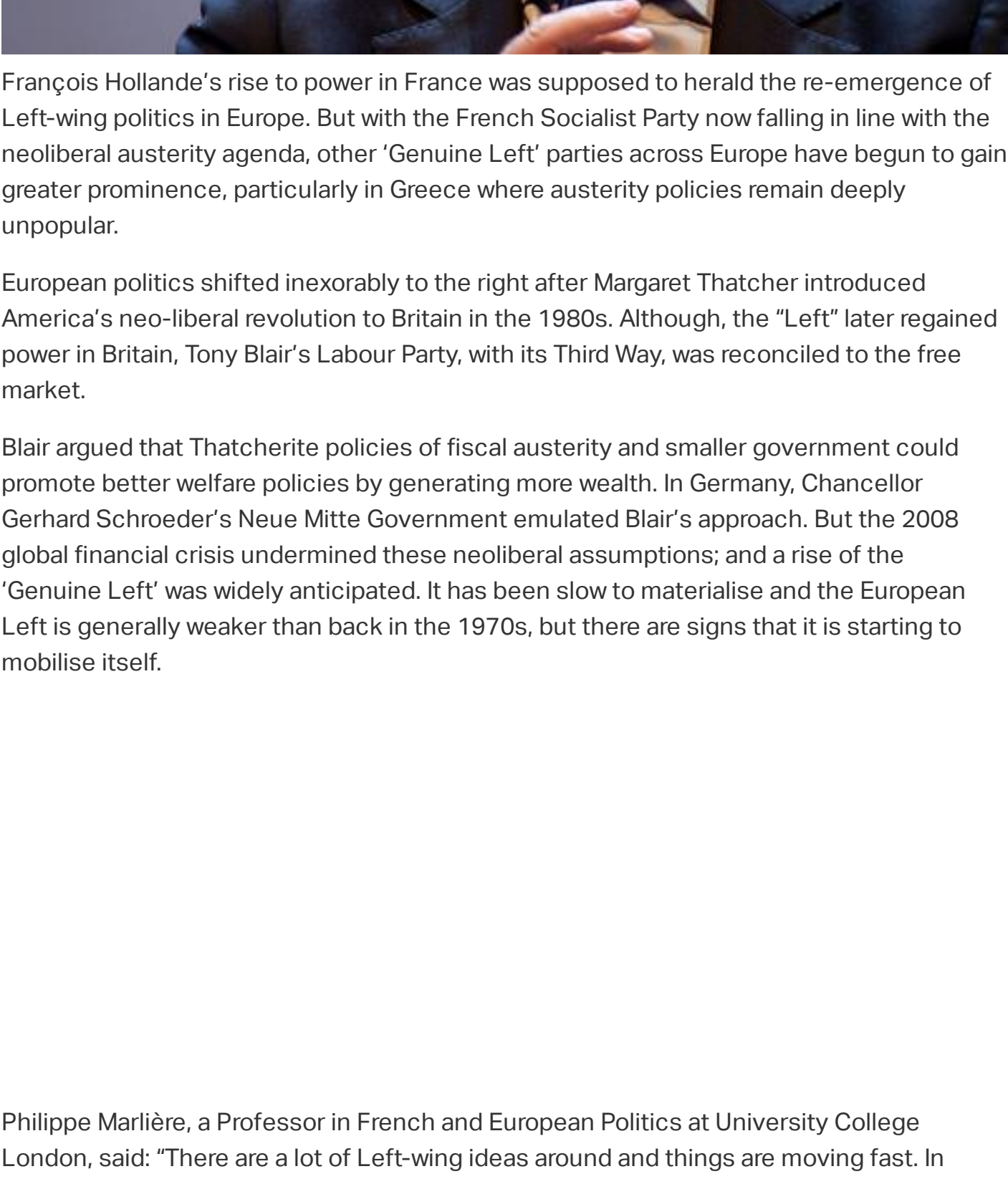


# The Faux French Socialist & The Reawakening Of Europe’s ‘Genuine Left’

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François Hollande’s rise to power in France was supposed to herald the re-emergence of Left-wing politics in Europe. But with the French Socialist Party now falling in line with the neoliberal austerity agenda, other ‘Genuine Left’ parties across Europe have begun to gain greater prominence, particularly in Greece where austerity policies remain deeply unpopular.

European politics shifted inexorably to the right after Margaret Thatcher introduced America’s neo-liberal revolution to Britain in the 1980s. Although, the “Left” later regained power in Britain, Tony Blair’s Labour Party, with its Third Way, was reconciled to the free market.

Blair argued that Thatcherite policies of fiscal austerity and smaller government could promote better welfare policies by generating more wealth. In Germany, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder’s Neue Mitte Government emulated Blair’s approach. But the 2008 global financial crisis undermined these neoliberal assumptions; and a rise of the ‘Genuine Left’ was widely anticipated. It has been slow to materialise and the European Left is generally weaker than back in the 1970s, but there are signs that it is starting to mobilise itself.

Philippe Marlière, a Professor in French and European Politics at University College London, said: “There are a lot of Left-wing ideas around and things are moving fast. In Greece, the socialist Syriza party has a great chance of getting into power, although it was marginal a year ago. In France, the Front de Gauche is an electoral coalition between the Communists and lots of splinter groups from the Far Left. It gained 11.1 percent, or around 4 million votes, in the election. We also are seeing the rise of similar socialist parties in Spain, Norway, Italy, Holland and Greece.”

A characteristic of the new socialist parties is that they contain refugees from the traditional Left-wing parties, which have moved into the Centre and adopted neoliberal ideologies.

“In France, the leader of the Front de Gauche, Jean-Luc Mélenchon spent 30 years of his career in the French Socialist Party before becoming disillusioned. In Germany, Oskar Lafontaine was a former SDP leader and finance minister of the German government. But he left to form Die Linke, the German equivalent of the Front de Gauche.”

The one European country however, where there is no dynamic opposition to the Centre-right parties in power is Britain.

“There are historical and cultural reasons, but the main reason is the undemocratic electoral system which undermines the chances of Left-wing parties to get into parliament. The mainstream Labour Party is not very Left-wing. It’s centrist and pro-austerity. We already know that its leader, Ed Miliband would be an extremely cautious leader who would do nothing dramatically different to the ruling Conservative Party,” said Marlière.

The new Left-wing parties on other hand share similar goals. The Dutch Socialist Party is a typical example. It is a former Communist party that now rejects Marxism-Leninism but has not abandoned the goal of creating a socialist society.

Opposition to the Anglo-American model of capitalism is a common thread. The Left-wing parties reject neo-liberal policies such as deregulation and privatisation of the public sector, low taxes and low public spending. Instead, they support strong welfare states and education systems funded by high levels of taxation, controls on capital, and egalitarian social policies.

## The Faux French Socialist

However, the French Socialist Party, which swept to power under Francois Hollande in May this year, is definitely not on Professor Marlière’s list of Europe’s rising Left-wing parties. He argues that the party has shifted to the Right in order to gain power and is breaking most of its election pledges.

“It’s becoming more and more difficult by the day to see the difference with his Right-wing predecessor, Nicholas Sarkozy. Am I surprised? No, I’m not.”

Hollande’s move to the Right is part of the long evolution of the Socialist Party and Social Democracy in France towards a type of Blairism without all the theorising about the Third Way. Hollande’s policies are in line with large sections of Thatcherism and what the British Conservatives have been doing in power under David Cameron,” he said.

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Even the introduction of a much-trumpeted 75 percent tax rate for the rich is little more than symbolic gesture to disguise the reality of Hollande’s politics, claimed Marlière.

“The 75 percent rate is only for people earning over €1 million, so it only affects a few thousand people and brings in a small amount of money..Anything below that figure and people pay 45 percent. The high rate was a means of appeasing the party’s base. It was a win-win situation for Hollande because the super-rich don’t vote for him anyway.”

It became obvious that Hollande has fallen in line with the austerity agenda he vowed to oppose when he failed to keep his promise to renegotiate the EU “Fiscal Compact”, which all EU nations, apart from the Czech Republic and the UK, signed in March. This infuriated the French Left who claim the Fiscal Compact allows Brussels to impose sanctions on countries that fail to respect a structural deficit ceiling of 0.5 percent of GDP. In many ways, it is the cornerstone of the EU’s “austerity drive”.

“The fact he didn’t fight to revise the fiscal treaty was called ‘capitulation’ by many on the Left. It means he is sticking with the austerity agenda and falling in line with Germany’s chancellor, Angela Merkel, who is running the show,” said Marlière.

“His failure has huge implications for the French economy. The Government has to abide by the sacrosanct rule to fight public deficit as an objective in itself. This prevents it from launching Keynesian-style policies to reinvigorate the economy. It removes all room for manoeuvre and undermines the French Parliament’s powers to pass new laws.”

Hollande’s recent introduction of VAT rises has also angered the Left, who believe indirect taxation unfairly targets the poor. The VAT hikes followed a report on competitiveness from Louis Gallois, the former head of aerospace giant EADS.

“Gallois’ major recommendation was a large cut in payroll taxes funded by a rise in VAT from 19.6 percent to 20 percent and the scrapping of the reduced rate of 7 percent for restaurants, construction, and ebooks, which will now go up to 10 percent. The strategy is pure neo-liberalism and a break with the traditional policies of the Left to increase taxes on the rich,” said Marlière.

Further disillusionment for the Left followed Hollande’s decision to increase France’s minimum wage by just 2 percent. It brought the monthly wage after tax to €1,118, an increase of just €21.50.

Not surprisingly, many people found it a miserly and insulting concession. A survey by pollster CSA showed that 82 percent of the French found it “inadequate”. The strongest attack came from Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of Front Gauche, who had called for as much as a 30 percent increase.

“It turns my stomach to see this situation,” he said. “This is a candy bar. You can’t even buy a baguette every day, maybe two in a week. You can buy yourself a cup of coffee per week.”

The Trade Union reaction was equally dismissive. Bernard Thibault, head of the hardline CGT, said his union was “deeply unsatisfied”, while a spokeswoman for Force Ouvriere said the increase was a “disappointment that would generate frustration and anger among workers”.

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## Is The Greek-Left Right?

The strong public reactions to Hollande’s policies will fuel anger on the Left in France, although it has yet to reach the scale seen in Greece, where angry demonstrations against the ruling coalition are an almost daily occurrence.

The public fury is such that Michalis Spourdalakis, a Professor of Political Science at Athens University, has no doubts that the Left-wing Syriza will soon take power.

“In the last Greek election in June, they were only 3 percent behind New Democracy and in recent polls they were 3 percent ahead. So I’m certain Syriza will win next time, even though we cannot be sure it would be by a majority,” Spourdalakis said.

Syriza, a political coalition of the radical left, has come from the shadows to shake up Greek politics. Although it has been around since 1974, it became a major force this year. In June’s election, Syriza won an unprecedented 26.9 percent of the vote, narrowly defeating the ruling New Democracy coalition, which had 29.6 percent. The traditional Greek Left-wing party, Pasok, languished in third position with 12.3 percent, with its pro-austerity policies proved deeply unpopular with left-wing voters.

Spourdalakis forecasts another Greek general election in the near future. He says the New Democracy coalition is riven by internal divisions and on the verge of collapse.

“There are major questions about the unity of the Government. In this month’s vote on the new Stability Pact, they got just 153 positive votes out of a possible 300. A lot of their partners abstained, or in the case of Pasok ministers, voted against the bill. Two of the ruling parties expelled seven MPs for voting against it,” he said.

The coalition’s policies are already deeply unpopular with millions of Greek citizens. During this month’s debate over the Stability Pact, there were angry demonstrations in Athens and an 80,000-strong protest outside parliament. Judges and doctors participated in the 48-hour general strike, which was the third in a six-week period of unrest.

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The new bill increased the severity of the Government’s austerity policies. It introduced more spending cuts, tax rises for those on low and middle incomes, education and social security reforms, as well as attacks on labour and trade union rights. The cuts in salaries and pensions come on top of the 40 percent reductions already in place.

Disillusionment is growing because of the ineffectiveness of the austerity agenda which has not produced growth. In April 2010, the IMF predicted Greece would have negative 1 percent growth in 2011 and then move to steady growth in 2012. But in April 2011, it changed its forecast for the year to negative 3 percent growth. It turned out negative 7 percent. In April 2012, the IMF predicted negative 4.7 percent for the year. But most economists are now predicting negative 7 percent, or worse.

“We are seeing things we have never seen in any advanced capitalism,” said Spourdalakis. “The coalition is selling everything, privatising everything, violating the constitution. Salaries are being slashed, labour relations are being weakened. But the people are mobilising and will react to this.”

Syriza’s plan is to reverse the austerity programme, whilst attempting to remain in the EU.

“They would negotiate with our debtors to arrange a far more prolonged period of repayment. Syriza hopes to stay in the EU, but not at all costs, not if it means killing our education system which is already suffering, as well as our hospitals and pensions.

But Syriza believes it is in a good bargaining position because if Greece left the Eurozone there would be a tidal wave of catastrophe. They can take advantage of that fear to negotiate better financial arrangements.”

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Having secured a longer period for repayment, Syriza would set about rebuilding the economy by mobilising the Greek people, said Spourdalakis.

“Syriza will stop the disaster of neo-liberalism and put working class needs on the agenda. It will seek to change the balance of social power by mobilising society and ‘empowering the powerless’.”

The party also intends to “abolish anti-labour laws and re-establish necessary welfare policies,” while taking social control of the banks and reorganise them to provide credit for development, which would restructure the real economy.

## The Left’s Light

Despite the rise in left-wing politics in many European countries, no other party is as close to power as Syriza and Spourdalakis believes it could become an example to Left-wing, or socialist agendas elsewhere.

“Syriza could be a beacon for the rest of Europe, and even beyond Europe. It’s a different strategy from those produced so far by leftist intellectuals and activists. It’s based on taking advantage of social circumstances and producing change in a dynamic way. ”

“Portugal, Spain, Italy and lately France all have similar problems, yet the EU is still dominated by neoliberal orthodoxy. Syriza’s approach is a game of politics and a gamble, but it can inspire a lot of solidarity on the Left of European politics.”

By David Smith, [EconomyWatch.com](#)

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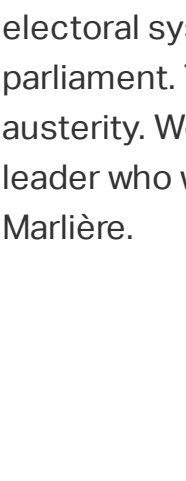
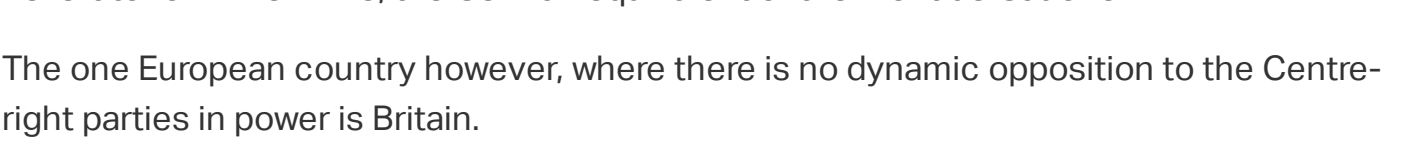
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