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Jean Castex's first three errors

Without a doubt, Jean Castex is a brilliant senior civil servant. But that does not make him the right man to become Prime Minister of France. He has not thought about how to restore the social pact in the face of financial globalisation and is satisfied with measures to buy social peace in the short term. As soon as he was appointed, he showed that he did not want to reform the political class, that he was content to fight the pandemic by doing as others did, and that he supported the Maastrichian project conceived during the Cold War.



Jean Castex is a long-toothed Gascon who reminds us of the character of Eugène de Rastignac created by Honoré de Balzac. Putting his social ascension before any ideology, he resigned from his opposition political party on the morning of 3 July in

order to be appointed Prime Minister to Emmanuel Macron in the afternoon. He is a member of the Siècle, the club of the business establishment.

The French administration works very well on its own. In this sense, it is one of the best in the world. The role of ministers is not to take the place of the directors of central administration who keep the machine running. On the contrary, it is to adapt the administration to the changes in the world; to steer it in the direction imagined by the President of the Republic and approved by the citizens at the time of his election.

The President of the Republic cannot have an opinion on everything. But he must think about Foreign Affairs and Defence, Police and Justice, Money and Taxes. These are the so-called regalian functions. At the moment, they must rethink this whole system in order to re-establish the social contract in the face of a profound change in the structures of society.

Inequalities in wealth have increased considerably. In recent years, the middle classes have melted like snow in the sun and a new social class has emerged, which has appeared in full view of everyone at the Yellow Vests demonstrations. The richest man in the country has a fortune equal to what a minimum wage earner cannot earn grossly in a million and a half years. This astronomical gap returns the country to a medieval organization and makes it impossible for democracy to function.

Since President Jacques Chirac's stroke on September 2, 2005, there has been no pilot in the plane. In the three presidential elections of 2007, 2012 and 2017, none of the elected candidates presented a vision of the country, just sectoral measures. Deprived of a president worthy of the name, France has therefore been adrift for 15 years.

The new French Prime Minister, Jean Castex, is a very high-ranking civil servant whose efficiency and attention to others is praised by everyone. But he is not a politician capable of setting new objectives and rethinking the architecture of the system.

His chief of staff, Nicolas Revel, is a ferocious Atlanticist. He is the son of academician Jean-François Revel and journalist Claude Sarraute. The former was the principal agent of the National Endowment for Democracy in France. The second was a columnist for *Le Monde*. With humor, she applied herself to ridiculing the workers' unions and valorizing societal struggles.

The record of Jean Castex's early days at Matignon is disastrous. In this article, I will point out his first three decisions in terms of government organization, response to the pandemic and European policy.

1- The reform of ministerial cabinets

As soon as his government was appointed, the new Prime Minister reformed the restrictive rule imposed by his predecessor on the composition of ministerial cabinets. He increased the number of political staff from 10 to 15. Indeed, the ministers in Édouard Philippe's governments complained that they did not have a team large enough to control the central administrations. What was the use of their 10 collaborators? To respond to the public and to improve their image.

Admittedly, ministers are not elected and are therefore accountable only to the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic, not directly to the voters. But since everyone thinks first of his or her career and then of his or her function, 10 public relations assistants are not too many.

Under these conditions, it was not necessary to create 5 additional posts for each minister, but to ensure that the staff hired was in the interest of the government, not the minister's future. Indeed, without prejudging what each will do, it is obvious that Jean Castex does not want the advisers to interfere with the administration, but to inform the ministers on the technical aspects of the files. It is only a small step forward that will not solve the problem.

2- Mandatory masks

Just before being appointed Prime Minister, Jean Castex was charged with a mission on ending lockdown after the Covid-19 epidemic. He is therefore supposed to have thought about the prevention of this disease.

While the previous government had declared that masks were of little use, Jean Castex made them compulsory. Public opinion misinterpreted this change in policy in terms of the availability of these masks: when there were none, they were useless; when they were there, they became mandatory.

In reality, eight months after the start of the global epidemic, we still do not know how this virus is transmitted and therefore how its spread can be prevented. The difference in the instructions is not due to the availability of the masks, but to the willingness of the new

government to show that it is taking matters into its own hands. This is not a medical measure, but a way to reassure oneself.

Remember, when the virus arrived in the West, all the authorities said that it was spread by contact via solid surfaces. There was hysteria in Europe about door handles. Touching a doorknob and putting your hand to your face was enough to risk immediate death.

It had been discovered that the virus could survive a few hours on doorknobs and even two days on cardboard. The conclusion was that letters and packages should be stored for 48 hours before being opened. Today, these instructions seem silly and no one follows them. However, scientifically speaking, nothing has changed. We know no more about the modes of contamination today than we did yesterday. We have only noticed that there seems to be no transmission via solid surfaces. It is therefore "believed" to be transmitted directly through some mysterious human liquids. The commonly accepted "opinion" is that the disease is transmitted through respiratory droplets. It is therefore advisable to wear a mask. But this belief is no more certain than the previous one.

I remember that the same was true during the AIDS epidemic. The retrovirus had been identified in blood and semen. It was concluded that it could be transmitted by mosquitoes and fellatio. For three years, health authorities in many countries increased prevention messages to that effect. Today, we know that they were wrong. AIDS is not transmitted by mosquitoes or fellatio.

The mistake is to believe that it is enough to catch a virus to get sick. The human body is designed to live with many viruses. Most of the time, it knows how to protect itself from them. Covid-19 is a respiratory disease. It is therefore transmitted like other respiratory diseases: through the air. If this is the case, the only useful masks must be airtight, like gas masks used by armies or P4 laboratories. Surgical masks, on the other hand, are false protection because they do not adhere to the skin and allow air to pass through in many places.

In the case where Covid-19 is transmitted like all other respiratory diseases - which is *a priori* the most probable hypothesis - the prevention must be to ventilate closed spaces. This is what the WHO declared at the beginning of the pandemic.

However, another problem arises. In recent years, air conditioning systems have been installed in many buildings. If the air-conditioned air absorbs vapours from contaminated water, all other people breathing in the air may be contaminated. The outbreak of

Legionnaire's disease (a serious bacterial infection of the lungs) at the 1976 American Legion Convention in Philadelphia is remembered. The same disease was similarly transmitted in 2000 to patients at the Georges Pompidou European Hospital in Paris, shortly after it opened. The entire air-conditioning system in this gigantic, brand new hospital had to be overhauled.

A distinction must be made between air-conditioning systems that expel air outside and those that operate in a closed circuit, possibly spreading the disease throughout the establishment. Contamination in the slaughterhouses, which are closed-circuit, low-temperature air-conditioned areas, suggests that this hypothesis should be taken very seriously.

To consider this hypothesis is to consider admitting that many modern buildings need to be rehabilitated, as was done with the Pompidou Hospital. These are substantial budgets comparable to those spent on asbestos removal from buildings.

For a senior civil servant, it is better to ignore this issue. Do not change anything, act like other States and make it compulsory to wear a mask.

3- The Hamiltonian Moment

The Franco-German project of Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President François Mitterrand was conceived during the Cold War. It was set out in the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and continues inexorably. The strategic objective is to build a supra-state structure capable of neutralising the divergence of interests between the two countries and of competing economically with the United States, Russia and China. Inexorably, the pieces of the puzzle are falling into place one by one, as was the case with the Constitutional Treaty.

Given the opposition of many European peoples to this construction under US control, the current steps are difficult to take, but the Covid-19 outbreak allows the German and French leaders to act in health panic. This is the Hamiltonian moment, in reference to the way Alexander Hamilton turned his country from a system of cooperation between independent states to a Federation. During the period 1789-95, when he was the 1st Secretary of the United States Treasury, he had the debts incurred by the member states during the War of Independence taken over by the federal government, creating their dependence. However, it was not until seventy years later, when the southern states refused the single customs duties that the federal government tried to impose on them in

the interests of the northern states, that federalism proved to be a straitjacket, leading to the Civil War.

Following one of the longest summits of EU Heads of State and Government, a EUR 750 billion plan was adopted by the European Council to facilitate post-Covid economic recovery. It will not be financed by a devaluation of the euro, as only 19 out of 27 Member States are members, but by 30-year loans. It should therefore be, if not impossible, at least very difficult to organise exits from the Union along the lines of the United Kingdom over the next 30 years.

Initially, when companies receive European grants or loans, everyone will be delighted. But when things get better and we see that we have been alienated for 30 years, the revolt will rumble.

This plan is presented as an emergency measure in the face of a terrible crisis. It is merely a communication package, as evidenced by the fact that, once adopted by the Council of Heads of State and Government, it has been sent back to the European Parliament and the national parliaments, which will not take a decision for months. Throughout this period the so-called "emergency" aid will be blocked.

The plan is accompanied by a new EU budget for the next seven years. It reveals the true nature of this union: for example, while the new "European Defence" was being communicated, its defence budget is being halved without explanation.

It is this sleight of hand that Jean Castex has just endorsed, putting the dream of power of Kohl and Mitterrand, then Merkel and Macron, before the will of independence of the peoples. It is a choice of extreme gravity that has already been shattered on the two occasions when France alone, and then Germany alone, attempted it with Napoleon and Hitler. In the current version, the Heads of State of the two countries agree among themselves, but probably not their peoples, and even less so those of the other countries concerned.

Emmanuel Macron and Jean Castex have agreed instead of the French to chain the country to the EU for 30 years in order to recover EUR 40 billion. But for what purpose? To reform the way work is paid and to bridge the social gap between the ultra-rich and the rest? To compensate the French people whose work has been destroyed by imposed confinement? Or to save time while preserving social peace? Unfortunately, these two men do not want to change anything and this money will be spent at a complete loss.

Translation Roger Lagassé

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