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Transcript

Sarkozy Vs Hollande: The Clash of Two Cultures

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John Peet:

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is John Peet. I'm the European editor of *The Economist*. And it's my privilege to chair an expert on France just six days ahead of the first round of the presidential election. This year, 2012, four of the UN Security Council's five permanent members are having either elections or a change of government. We've had Russia, if you can call that an election, we are going to see China's change in June, and there's obviously a big election on the other side of the Atlantic in November.

I think of the four, this one, and I would have said at the beginning of the year, the French one was the most uncertain, although it's looking slightly more certain today than it did. But it's a very important election, and it's also very important because as everybody knows, the French presidency is one of the most powerful executive positions in politics. So, French presidents, unlike some American presidents, can get things done.

And the second thing I wanted to say, by way of introduction, is, as much as the British press, including ourselves at *The Economist*, have said this election has been characterized by a denial by most of the candidates of what the real issues facing France are, particularly economically and in relation to the euro crisis. So looking at it from abroad, I don't know whether Dominique will agree with this, so looking at it from abroad, it looks as if the candidates are talking about things like immigration, Schengen, halal meat at one point, a 75% tax rate on the other side, expanding the budget, spending more money, rather than the things that most of the countries in the eurozone are having to do. So it's given this election a slightly unreal air and made the outcome and the implications for the rest of Europe, I think, extremely important.

I'm not going to waste time introducing Dominique Moisi because anybody who follows France and French foreign policy in particular will, I'm sure, be familiar with his writings and indeed with him. He was a founder, member, and is still a senior adviser at IFRI in Paris, and he's about to become a visiting professor here at King's College in London. So, without further ado, Dominique Moisi. Welcome to Chatham House.

Dominique Moisi:

Thank you very much. I'm closing my own mobile, if I can do that. Thank you. Well, I think five years ago, Chatham House did invite me, more or less the same time, on the eve of the French elections. And I think my presentation was about an explanation of the reasons why Nicolas Sarkozy was going to be the next president of France. Today, I think my presentation is probably

going to be about the reverse – why is Nicolas Sarkozy about to be defeated in the upcoming elections? I was of course very daring last time. I think I'm even more daring today because to announce that less than one week before the first ballot and less than three weeks before the second ballot, when one knows that Nicolas Sarkozy is the artist of French politics, is to take a huge risk. Nevertheless, I think one has to take risks in life. So I – my presentation will be in two parts. Why is Nicolas Sarkozy about to be defeated? And the second part: what would an Hollande presidency mean for France and for Europe?

Today, it's difficult to be an incumbent in a democratic society. You quoted Russia, but I'm not absolutely sure Russia is on par with truly democratic systems. Unemployment in a country like France is close to 10%. It's difficult to be re-elected with something like 10% unemployment. The rate of approval of Nicolas Sarkozy is the lowest of any president of the Fifth Republic. Only 36% of the French have a positive vision of him. I must remind you that last time an incumbent president was defeated, 1981, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing had a 40% rate of approval. If Nicolas Sarkozy was to be re-elected, it would be an absolute first in the history of the Fifth Republic in the sense that it would be the first time the representative of the same political party would win, for the fourth consecutive time, an election. 1995: Chirac. 2002: Chirac again. 2007: Sarkozy. 2012 – it's simply never happened in the history of the Fifth Republic that someone should win a fourth consecutive mandate for his political affiliation. You can only win two mandates in the French political system.

But forget those structural factors, those historical stakes. The defeat of Nicolas Sarkozy, if it does take place, is not based on rationality. It's not based on a judgement of his record, but based on a rejection of his person. It's totally emotional. To some extent, it is totally unfair and irrational. But Nicolas Sarkozy has violated fundamental unwritten rules of the French political system. You reminded us that the president of France is very important. Yes, he's the most important figure of any democratic society. He's the equivalent of being the queen of England and the prime minister of England at the same time. And I would say that as prime minister of England, the record of Nicolas Sarkozy is quite good. On balance, he faced a terrible crisis, resisted with energy and determination, tried to start reform and implemented some of them in the field of education and retirement age, was daring in his foreign policy – and I would say successful when it comes to the Ivory Coast and even more so Libya. I mean, one could assume that Gaddafi might still be in power without the determination of Nicolas Sarkozy.

But it's not the exercise of power that people resent, it's the style. As queen of England, so to speak, as a symbol of power, he didn't make... he didn't understand what the French were expecting from their elected monarch: dignity. He was the first post-modern president of the Fifth Republic. He broke the division that existed between the private and the public field. He de-sacralised the function by simply giving the impression of not respecting the sanctity of the state. The first two years were, from that standpoint, catastrophic. He realized that. He changed it, but too late. He didn't change the image he had in the minds of the French.

And today, it may be an election by default between someone who has been too much and someone who may not be enough: François Hollande. But by the end of the day, if you look at the public opinion polls, you have the feeling that a majority of Frenchmen can't stand the idea of seeing the same man invading their living and dining room through the television screen for five more years. It is as simple as that. It's not a question of programme; it's a question, I repeat, of personal style. Between Bonaparte and Attlee, the French seem to be in for Attlee. [Laughter] Between the man who says 'help me to save you, because I will save you if you help me to save you', and the man who says, 'I want to help you to save yourself', the French are in for the second interpretation and not for the first one.

And I think the campaign of Nicolas Sarkozy, and in fact the campaign of François Hollande, has been translating this great imbalance. It was not about ideas. It was not about programme. One man, François Hollande, was practising soccer, and was in fact the Italian coach 20 years ago using Catenaccio, purely defensive tactics. He scored a goal early on, during the game, and just wanted to keep that advantage rolling. While the other man, Nicolas Sarkozy, was practising boxing, trying to punch right and left at the risk of punching himself in the face, which he did from time to time.

More structurally, there was a problem, precisely because there was not so much deep differences on their economic and social programme, because Nicolas Sarkozy was never a liberal in the Anglo-Saxon meaning of the term. He was always a statist, a Colbertiste. And because Hollande himself is more of a social democrat than most of his party affiliation and members, they've both been trying to balance the fact that on economy and society they were at the centre – by courting the extreme right, in the case of Nicolas Sarkozy; on immigration issues; on, in fact, sovereignty issues – to the risk of losing the centre. And flirting with the extreme left, in the case of François Hollande, by making some absurd proposal of taxing above 75% the revenues of those making more than €1 million per year, which is – unfortunately for those

people, there are very few of them. It didn't make sense economically. It could make sense ethically, or no.

So, we have seen, in fact, the most boring electoral campaign. The game was poor. The only thing that was interesting was the suspense about the result – and even that seems to be disappearing lately.

So, what kind of president would François Hollande be? First, you must realize that this is the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic that the incumbent president is, in reality, the challenger, and that the man who is challenging him is, in reality, the insider. Hollande is much, much more representative of the classical French elite. He did all the right things – went through the National School of Administration, started to work at the Élysée Palace – I mean, he's the insider, while Sarkozy is the outsider. And in fact, Sarkozy is so much the outsider that having been humiliated by the French elite, he proceeded to humiliate them, to the point of losing their support – losing the support of the judges, the diplomats, of the military – name them, they don't like that president who has infuriated them by treating them like nothing precisely because he was not part of them and, in fact, exerting a revenge on them.

You have three François Hollandes. The first one is the young, bright, full of sense of humour presidential aide to François Mitterrand. He's so young he works in a junior position. But that's where he comes from: François Mitterrand. It is François Mitterrand that decided him [sic] to go into politics. It is François Mitterrand who recruited him when he was a very young man. He is an inheritor of Mitterrand, for the best as well as for the worst.

The second François Hollande was, for ten years, the unconvincing leader of the Socialist Party. This is when and where he got his reputation for indecisiveness, his inability to take a line upon another, to decide one thing in a systematic and decisive way.

But a third François Hollande has emerged, one that is surprising everyone, even the closest members of the Socialist Party he had. A man inhabited by the presidential ambition. A man so keen to become the next president of France that he inflicted on his own body very severe sacrifices – to lose more than 20 kilos and to change appearance. A man whose key line has been, 'I'm normal' – by opposition, of course, to the president who by definition was deemed to be abnormal, when you presented yourself as normal. And he's succeeded so much in convincing the French that he is normal that in fact he has looked banal and not only normal, which played a role in the dullness of the campaign.

At the same time, it would be very dangerous to underestimate that man. I had the opportunity to be with him a little bit when he came to London last time, because my first assignment as visiting professor at King's [College] was to bring François Hollande to King's College. And the man I met was small – but who am I to speak – in physical terms. The definition of Jacques Chirac, i.e. a keen politician, a man who shines when surrounded by people who want to shake his hand, to hug him, to be taking pictures with him. A friendly guy, really friendly. Honestly friendly. And, a killer – otherwise he wouldn't be where he is in politics.

What will, what would an Hollande victory mean for France and for Europe? Well, the first thing you have to remember is that the situation we are in looks very much like the situation we were in on the eve of 1981 – except 1981 took place already. And the process of naiveté that went on for more than two years between 1981 and 1983 is probably going to be very unlikely to repeat itself, if only because the world has changed drastically. The margin of manoeuvring of any French president, of any European leader, right now is extremely slim given the deficits, given the fact that the financial crisis has not been solved yet, given the fact that Europe is a much more constraining reality than it was in 1981. Add the fact that the programmes of the two candidates are not in reality that different from one another.

One should not expect too much difference. It doesn't mean that the markets may not react negatively, especially if the legislative elections come up with very flattering results for the radical left or the Green, especially if one gets the feeling that Hollande will depend on people much more radical than him to be able to govern. But the moment he is going to be president, he will fully occupy the entire function, whatever the image one can have of him today, whatever the lack of experience, which is true, which he has.

So I wouldn't fear too much. I wouldn't take too seriously the campaign slogan of Nicolas Sarkozy when he says that the victory of Hollande would mean that France would become, from one day to the other, a new Greece. This is part of the shift of campaigning and in fact in 2007 Nicolas Sarkozy was campaigning on hope. He was saying, I am the incarnation of modernity, I am the man who's going to introduce structural reforms to France – badly needed structural reforms. But in 2012, Nicolas Sarkozy is the candidate of fear. In fact, he is reversing the strategy of François Hollande, who has been trying, successfully so far, to make the campaign a referendum on the personality of Nicolas Sarkozy. And Nicolas Sarkozy is doing exactly the opposite. You may not like me, I may understand that, but you know I've changed deeply – now

I'm a mature man and you don't want to risk everything by choosing this non-entity in front of me. So in a way, this is what this campaign has been about.

And to conclude, I would say that it is not absolutely a surprise. In a way, we have been entering a post-ideological world for a very long time. But we are maybe re-entering an ideological world since the financial crisis of 2007. Marx is back. And this is what the personality of Jean-Luc Mélenchon translates. But the French have not yet realized that. And as a result, they've focused exclusively on the personal style of the two main candidates. I think I've spoken my time, and it's all yours.