

Dominique Moïsi at the AEJ
from Quentin Peel

6 April 2017

After a lifetime as a political scientist and commentator, Dominique Moïsi might be expected to have a stab at a prediction about the outcome of the forthcoming French elections. But it shows just how unpredictable it is that he will not do so.

"It is the most uncertain French election I can remember, and the most important French election I can think of," he told the AEJ last week.

Moïsi, senior counsellor at the Institut Montaigne think tank in Paris and a widely-published columnist, went on to quote Joschka Fischer, former German foreign minister, as saying: "This election is not about France. It is about Europe. And it is about democracy."

If the British vote to leave the EU is likely to damage the European Union, Moïsi added, a victory for Marine Le Pen and her far-right Front National in France would be far worse: "It would be the last nail in the coffin of Europe." He described her as "an Iron Lady with a fascist mind. She is a very savvy, competent, efficient and intelligent politician. She is no Berlusconi. She is much better."

Ms Le Pen may well come top in the first round of French voting on April 23, but none of the opinion polls expect her to win the second round on May 7, when voters of the centre-right and centre-left might be expected to unite to defeat her. But the polls were wrong in the UK and the US last year. It is still too close to call.

Moïsi sees clear elements in common between the election campaign in France, and last year's two great political shocks: the Brexit vote in the UK referendum, and Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential poll. He summed them up in three words: "anger, fear and nostalgia."

In essence, the British and American votes amounted to a revolt against the elite and the political establishment in both countries. The same is certainly true in France, where three of the top four candidates represent parties or movements outside the political mainstream. The two candidates most likely to win through to the second round of voting in May are Ms Le Pen, leader of the far-right Front National, and Emmanuel Macron, who launched his own centrist movement – En Marche – only last year.

But there are specifically French elements that make the outcome in France so unpredictable. One is the high level of potential abstentions, and the other, the high level of voters still undecided less than two weeks before the first round of voting.

Moïsi says that the normal level of abstention in a French presidential election is just 20 per cent, but this time it could be as high as 30-35 per cent. And the proportion still undecided is as high as 40 per cent. Although Macron is seen as the clear favourite to defeat Le Pen in the second round, by attracting centre-ground voters from both left and right, he lacks an established political organisation and his support is relatively soft. In contrast, her core supporters are fiercely committed to their cause.

He sees the 39-year-old Macron as an extraordinary mixture: both a classic product of the French elite, and an outsider. He sees French voters as a mixture of the rational and the romantic, and that

combination works in Macron's favour. "He sees that he has a destiny to save France from Marine Le Pen," Moïsi says. "Macron is the candidate both of hope, and the status quo."

His wife Brigitte – his former schoolmistress, who is 24 years older than him – says it is not easy "to live with Joan of Arc". Moïsi thinks he is more like the youthful Napoleon Bonaparte, or a romantic character from the novels of Stendhal.

Macron's other advantage is that he is not from Paris, but from the provinces. That helps his alternative image as an outsider. But even if he wins, he will face a huge challenge to answer the grievances in French society. He will have to forge a parliamentary majority from other political parties in order to win support for economic and social reforms.

Moïsi's warning is that even if French voters choose the attractive and youthful centrist as their next president – as US voters did in electing Barack Obama – failure to defuse the resentment against the elite could see a US-style swing to someone like Trump next time. The Front National will not go away: it will be "defeated, divided but strong."