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London terror will help Marine Le Pen's presidential campaign

Head of the French far-right party Front national Marine Le Pen.

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It is easy to imagine what people thought as they heard the news from London: this will never end. But they will also have thought: this cannot be allowed to continue.

Nowhere will those thoughts resonate more than in France, which has suffered 240 deaths from terrorist attacks in the past two years. And with two French teenagers, who were on a school trip to the city, lying seriously injured in a London hospital, the latest outrage will move terrorism to the centre of France's presidential election.

The concerns are natural and immediate: as then prime minister Manuel Valls put it after the first wave of attacks in 2015, "security is the first human right".

The far-reaching measures France has adopted — including adding 9000 or so recruits to the police and intelligence services, expelling almost 100 radical Islamic preachers, shutting fundamentalist mosques and reinforcing electronic surveillance — provide no absolute guarantees of safety; nor do the strengthened powers of detention under the state of emergency that has been in place since the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks.

But for all their inevitable limitations, those measures seemed to blunt the issue's political force, shifting it to the background of a presidential campaign whose news cycle has been dominated by the devastating impact the revelations that he had put his wife and children on the parliamentary payroll have had on the standing of Francois Fillon, the candidate of the centre-right Les Republicains who was the initial favourite in the contest. Now, as the scenes from London flash on every screen, that is likely to change, creating room for the Front National's Marine Le Pen to expand her base of support.

Le Pen's opportunity is all the greater as her main rival, Emmanuel Macron — a centrist former merchant banker who served as economics minister under Francois Hollande — has found it difficult to articulate a coherent position on the complex issues terrorism raises.

In an effort to attract votes from the left, Macron has expressed concerns about the repeated renewals of the state of emergency and distanced himself from proposals to strip French citizenship from dual nationals convicted of terrorism-related offences.

At the same time, he has shied away from the broader controversy on migration, merely promising, in last week's presidential debate, to adopt an approach that combines "humanity with firmness", including speedier processes for deporting refugees who do not meet the requirements for receiving asylum.

And he has been purposefully vague about France's prohibitions on headscarves, the burka and the burkini, suggesting that restrictions need to be justified with respect to public order and safety, not cultural issues.

Yet Macron's ambivalence may prove costly, as these issues, which touch on fundamental questions of national identity, strike especially sensitive chords in France.

The historian Hans Kohn got to the heart of the matter more than 60 years ago. In his native Germany, Kohn argued, the idea of "German-ness" developed long before the formation of a German state; it was therefore framed in mainly ethnic and linguistic terms, with the German nation being "an irreducibly particular *volksgemeinschaft* (folk community)" that one could only be born into.

However, in France the state was well-established by the time the concept of citizenship developed in the late 18th century. Citizenship was consequently viewed primarily as an act of political allegiance. That act was potentially open to all, regardless of their ethnic origin; but those seeking French citizenship had to be willing to accept France's political principles, social and cultural traditions and way of life.

The difference between these conceptions of citizenship sharpened in the tumultuous centuries that followed. As Rogers Brubaker has shown in his comparative study of nationalism, Germany's move in 1913 to restrict citizenship to those of German descent reflected German elites' "lack of confidence in the social, cultural, and political transformation of immigrants into Germans".

In contrast, by 1889, when France expanded the scope for naturalisation and formalised the principle that anyone born on French soil was a citizen, the country's elites were convinced that "immigrants could be transformed into 'real' Frenchmen" by universal secular education and compulsory military service.

As a result, when labour shortages developed in the 1960s, Germans never viewed the millions of Muslims who came to work in their factories as future members of the national community; rather, they were guests who, so long as they played their economic role, could retain their lifestyle until they returned "home", as they were eventually expected to do.

The French, on the other hand, always believed their migrants would sooner or later become French in every sense of the word, adopting France's cultural heritage as previous generations of immigrants had so gratefully done.

It is that belief which has been shattered, not merely by the terrorist attacks but by the growing gulf between second and even third-generation immigrants and their French counterparts.

Indeed, with last month's Mehdi Meklat affair — in which Meklat, a young blogger whose talents as a journalist had made him the toast of Paris's intellectual circles, was found to have anonymously posted thousands of anti-Semitic, homophobic and often violent tweets — even cases that had been hailed as exemplifying integration turned out to be anything but, highlighting the depth of the problems.

Yet the French view of citizenship as involving more than the simple process of acquiring a passport remains firmly embedded in the country's psyche — and understandably so. The political philosopher Michael Walzer, who is hardly a bigot, put it well when he warned that "To tear down the walls of the state is not to create a world without walls, but rather to create a thousand petty fortresses", as fear and distrust lead groups that have nothing in common to shelter behind whatever barriers they can construct.

Le Pen will, no doubt, play to those concerns. And the unfortunate reality is that with the possible exception of Fillon, who seems to be out of the race, her opponents have little other than platitudes to offer in response.

That is not to suggest that Le Pen's proposals, which would slash France's migrant intake by 90 per cent so as to "defend France's unity and national identity", are any more sensible than her promises of lavish social spending, renationalisation and protectionism; but with a recent Kantar Sofres-OnePoint poll finding that 69 per cent of voters regard her as "capable of taking decisions", while 49 per cent think she "understands people's daily problems", she undeniably has a solid base on which to build.

Her tirades against the political establishment and its failure to protect the country's citizens are also well-targeted: an Ipsos poll earlier this month found that 62 per cent of voters are disappointed with their political representatives, while fully 82 per cent think politicians are corrupt, an increase of 10 percentage points in barely a year.

Of course, France's two-round electoral system, which will give Le Pen's leading opponent a chance to assemble votes from across the political spectrum, poses a formidable obstacle to a Le Pen victory. But the fact that she seems certain to be among the top two candidates indicates the severity of France's crisis. And as the attacks in London tragically remind us, France is not alone.