

Yellow vests' anger sums up our spreading Western malaise

[Henry Ergas](#) 12:00AM December 28, 2018



Gilets jaunes protestors light flares in the colours of the French flag during an anti-government protest in Bordeaux. Picture: AFP.

As 2018 draws to a close, it is hard to find a Western leader whose authority has survived the year intact. Donald Trump's presidency may not be derailed by the chaos in Washington but it compounds the sense of a drama veering towards a grim conclusion. Theresa May's prime ministership hangs by a frayed thread as Brexit edges towards a hard landing. After a string of electoral routs, Angela Merkel has been forced to step down as party leader and announce her departure from the chancellorship. As for Emmanuel Macron, his standing and credibility have been shattered, and his reform agenda with them.

Nor have smaller countries been spared the carnage. Of the EU's 28 member states, an unprecedented 14 have minority governments.

Sweden, long a haven of stability, has gone without a government for months. Belgium has once more descended into turmoil. With the tensions over Catalonia no closer to resolution, Spain's minority government is on the verge of collapse.

And Canberra's revolving door speaks for itself.

Yes, each crisis reflects factors of its own. And it is true that democracies go through phases where they teeter on the brink, as they did in the 1970s, before somehow putting Humpty Dumpty together again.

But much as in the 70s, what we know is what is not working; the alternative that could reinvigorate common purpose and restore confidence remains elusive.

To that extent, nothing better captures the mood of the year than the revolt of the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests), which combined the suddenness of a flash flood with the devastating force of an earthquake. There is in that revolt an unmistakably French element.

Voltaire exaggerated when he quipped that insurrection was France's only invention, as did Carlyle in claiming that forming riotous mobs is the "talent (that) distinguishes the French People from all Peoples, ancient and modern". It is, however, undeniable that the centralisation France inherited from the ancien regime, which was made even more pronounced under the Fifth Republic, cemented popular uprisings as the only effective check on a quasi-monarchical executive.

Yet for all their local flavour, the *gilets jaunes* also speak to broader trends. Nothing better attests to social media's effectiveness as a mobilising tool than the speed at which the movement spread. That has its irony: it is the very innovation Macron used to great advantage in his assault on the presidency that has brought him to his knees.

But technology cannot explain the movement's success; rather, it spread so rapidly because it tapped into such deep discontent. The immediate spark — a now abandoned increase in fuel taxes — is well known. What merits closer attention is the ferocity of the reaction. Listening to interviews with participants, it is clear that its sources were not solely economic.

Rather, the interviews brought to mind a famous analysis by EP Thompson, a British Marxist who revitalised social history in the 60s, of the bread riots that swept Britain in the 18th and early 19th centuries. "It is of course true," he wrote, "that riots were triggered by soaring prices." But those "grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices, a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor".

There was, in other words, the conviction that what was at issue was more than an injury — it was an outrage that offended unstated, but strongly held, norms of morality.

It is not difficult to understand why the fuel tax increase would strain that "moral economy" to the breaking point. After all, France's urban elites, with their access to high quality, heavily subsidised public transport and their tax-advantaged low-emissions vehicles, would largely escape its impact. Not so the country's less well-off who live and work far from Paris's fabled metro.

Adding to the anger, voters in France, like their counterparts elsewhere, had been promised that reducing emissions would be painless. As Christian Gollier, one of France's most eminent environmental economists and a leading proponent of carbon taxes, wrote shortly after the movement began, much of the blame rests with those who, mouthing an irresponsible "fiction", refused to acknowledge that "replacing fossil fuels by expensive renewables will cost blood and tears". Given that fiction was

merely one among many others, the puzzle is not that the explosion occurred but that it was so slow in coming.

No less striking, however, was the elite's reaction. Macron's regal arrogance was on full display when he referred repeatedly to "the French people" and "their leaders", as if the country's governing caste was a natural aristocracy. But even more shocking (including to the newspaper's editors) was the response when *Le Monde* featured a *gilets jaunes* couple who, with three young children, struggle to make ends meet. The newspaper's online comments were inundated with abuse, as its highly educated, well-heeled readers — whose sense of *liberte*, *egalite*, *fraternite* unfailingly extends to migrants and refugees — denounced their fellow citizens as worthless white trash, highlighting the roots of the *gilets jaunes*' fury.

Fury, however, is a pre-political sentiment: it is one thing to throw stones, another to advance coherent demands. And while inchoate rebellions can extract concessions, they cannot overcome the circumstances that conjured them into existence.

That too brings us back to the 19th century when Carlyle, observing the Chartists' mass demonstrations, produced an essay remembered today only for first speaking of the "condition of England".

Carlyle's point was that the demonstrations, with which he sympathised, were "a clamour" that had not yet become "a struggle". A roar without a voice, the movement could not express "the soul of all justifiable radicalism" in a manner that would penetrate "the earnest obscure purpose of democracy". But with its virulence reflecting "the disease" that lay "deep in the heart" of the English nation, "if something be not done, something will do itself one day, and in a fashion that will please - nobody".

That is the essence of our predicament. A destabilising outrage on one

side; the incomprehension of governing elites on the other.

Forty years ago, faced with a similar crisis, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan founded a new politics that gave the roar a voice, rebuilding the foundations of political stability. Now, however, neither the Right nor the Left seems to have the capabilities — of political craftsmanship and imagination — required for devising such a new politics.

Trapped in the impasse, all we can do is to let 2019 do what the future does best, which is to surprise us. May the surprises be good ones.