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Snapshots of Obama's First 100 Days: A French Spring in Washington?

LSE Ideas

by Robert Kelley

When Barack Obama fielded questions from an adoring French audience in Strasbourg earlier this month, he pleased his hosts by singling out a shining example of European ingenuity in public transportation – the high-speed rail system. The president disclosed his envy for high-speed trains to the audience, and it should not be taken lightly when American presidents get envious. Just two weeks later in Washington Obama actively campaigned for a similar network in the United States and committed \$8 billion for good measure.

Riders of the TGV rejoiced at high velocity, no doubt. Six years ago, seldom were heard any encouraging words for all things French. Claims of France's relegation to the "old Europe" highlighted the opinion that America could replace Paris with Prague and Berlin with Budapest. The election of the progressive Obama has seen off that argument. In a strange twist of fate that would make Donald Rumsfeld smolder, we see a lot more of France in American public policies these days.

Looking at the ambitious agenda laid out in these lively first 100 days, the social democratic tendencies are remarkable. In response to the ongoing financial crisis, the Obama administration is considering deals to secure a large ownership stake in 19 of America's largest banks. Speculation rose this week that it would seize a majority stake in the nation's largest automobile manufacturer, General Motors. The stimulus bill passed in February includes \$27 billion devoted to transportation infrastructure, in addition to the money set aside for high-speed rail. And then there's health care component: \$634 billion in the administration's proposed budget to serve as a "down payment" for overhauling the fragmented and ineffective private system into a public-private entity, aimed at driving down costs and providing universal coverage.

You would think a merry band of French social democrats decamped from the rive gauche to infiltrate the Washington area (although surely not on the Potomac's own left bank, Virginia). To make sure the parallels did not get out of hand, the Brookings Institution convened a panel asking the now mind-blowing question: "Is America the New France?" Senior Fellow and moderator Justin Vaisse quickly pointed out that if the United States was indeed turning into France, the journey to New York would take a mere 90 minutes, all citizens would enjoy health coverage, eighty per cent of homes would be powered by nuclear energy, and the food of far higher quality. Clive Crook, the chief Washington columnist with the Financial Times, opined that while the differences are narrowing, Americans and the French still retain vastly different views of the individual's relationship to the state and of what one should expect of his government. Brookings Senior Fellow William Galston underscored this point with compelling data from a recent OECD survey: French public spending is 15 per cent higher than in the United States. This translates into France boasting half the poverty rate of America and 25 per cent less inequality between the rich and the poor. France also offers twice the amount of benefits to its unemployed, which recently rose to 8.2 per cent.

Overall, the panel concluded, embracing French public policies can yield only limited benefits for Americans. The overriding concern is that the American government, in the absence of a viable and coherent opposition, will exert too much control over its citizens – a decidedly transformative prospect, and not one for the better. All agreed that over-indulging in the American social democratic experiment would be detrimental to the American self-image as independent, self-determined, and hard-working. As for the upgrade in gastronomy, the American appetite will surely abide without any qualms whatsoever.

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