Interview with Pascal Durand, Vice-President of the Greens-European Free Alliance and member of the French party Europe Ecology - The Greens

What is your assessment of the last European legislature?
• The greatest successes of the 2014-2019 parliamentary term (collective or personal) ?

P.D. : « I do not think in terms of victory on one single goal. I try to win battles, and when we manage to win while being in a minority, it is a victory. I do not consider that there is ONE major topic, but rather that there are SEVERAL topics, that can be social, environmental, migratory...In general, every time we manage to make Europe move forward towards more solidarity and greater coherence with its objectives and values, I am satisfied. Every time we cause it to step back, I am disappointed. I do not want to isolate one single element because that would imply that some topics are more important than others, and I do not believe that. »

• What are the greatest failures of the 2014-2019 parliamentary term ? Is there something you regret ?

P.D. : « There was one case that really saddened me, because I did not manage to convince my socialist friends : the directive on the Protection of Trade Secrets. I found myself deeply isolated in the fight against this directive, from beginning to end. I see this directive as large-scale deception attempting to convince us that its aim is the protection of small bakers’ secret baguette recipes, whereas its genuine purpose is to allow large corporations to conceal some of their social and environmental practices. Some of us did notice this, such as Virginie Rozière who is working on the directive aiming at protecting whistle-blowers. I also requested this issue of whistle-blower protection to be added to the directive on trade secrets, so that both elements could be placed on the same level. I did not manage to convince my colleagues on this matter and on the fact that this directive was in fact an infringement of democracy and citizens’ interests. Indeed, democracy is at stake here as we are entering a world that is increasingly centred on expertise, and yet we do not have access to all the necessary information. Volkswagen’s case is a good example: thousands of people now have respiratory problems, but Volkswagen used the directive on trade secrets to turn down our requests for information on this. It is therefore a major subject as it places limitations on information access, democracy and the capacity for politicians to act. The case of the directive on trade secrets is symptomatic of a failure. Today, as we are voting the transposition of this directive in France, people are making a fuss about it, but action would have been required earlier, or at least it should have been recognized that mistakes had been made. »

For more information on this directive, see:
https://tinyurl.com/y87w3bxm;
https://tinyurl.com/ybdhhlw4
• Any forecast for your political family for 2019’s European elections?

P.D.: “I will not offer a forecast. I can only say that I am not optimistic because social democracy has not been able to reform, and political ecology has not been able to open. Everyone is doing their little business on their own, and everyone is claiming to be better than others. In the French case, Macron has brought the question of Europe back into the debate, we can at least acknowledge that. In some way, Macron provided a defensive shield against the far-right, but the policies he implemented are not the ones we would have wished for. The objective would be to shift political faultlines, yet we do not seem to be able to manage that. I therefore think that for the European elections, things are not looking good. I do not think that a momentum can be gathered for the ecologists, because society is not ready to follow political ecology. Ecology is everywhere, it would be useful to notice its progress and to try and make it the essential, central force in this early 21st century, as socialism was at the beginning of the 20th. Ecology is better suited than socialism to address our current situation on social issues, the planet, and humanity at large. But I consider that in France, we are painfully missing a Jaurès or a Blum, one of these persons who would have had the ability to be actors, thinkers, and not only be in an electoral logic. Today, we are moving backwards, and at the European level as well. That is why it is important to try to build a European axis of defence against populist trends such as those observed in Austria, Italy, or elsewhere. I hold it against the Italian Partito Democratico that it has not tried to discuss with the 5 Stars Movement, that it has rather chosen to rebuild its virginity in opposition, letting the far-right reach power. I have never seen the far-right reach power and return it later. We will therefore have to see how things develop. In my view, the far-right is currently mustering the means to lock down Europe. We are giving it border control, police, home affairs, and leaving it to the most ideological liberals to control of the economy and budgets. My view is very pessimistic, because if pro-Europeans consider that a federal and open Europe is necessary to solve the crisis of tomorrow, then none of our most pressing problems are going to be solved, from social issues to humanitarian problems and youth unemployment.”

• Greatest challenges for the EU for the 2019-2024 parliamentary term?

P.D.: “We are currently failing in our greatest challenge. We should have had the possibility to take the European Parliament out of this large coalition between the Socialists, the Centre,
and the EPP, which goes to the smallest common denominator, generally towards the centre-right, and claims to represent a pro-European coalition of the willing. This logic lead to a binary vision: on the one hand Juncker’s Europe, and on the other hand the anti-Europeans. This can hold on a little longer, as we remain the majority, but facing people that are feeling always more rejected, if we do not offer them an alternative to Juncker’s Europe, then we are heading towards a rise of the extremes. People like me are going to stop voting, because they do not want to spend their lives choosing between Le Pen (far-right), Mélenchon (far-left), and Juncker (liberal). For the last 20 years, we have been told that we only had a choice between a dominant model and a marginal one that we reject, but a day will come when people get tired, which will inevitably lead to a rise of the extremes. Macron is taking that risk by trying to impose his vision of Europe in a manner reminiscent of Bonapartism. It is working in France thanks to his parliamentary majority, but not in Europe because there is no absolute majority in parliament, and problems cannot be settled in this way.

How will the EU look in 2030?

P.D. : « If we do nothing, it will probably look like some kind of large internal market modelled on what the British have said they wish, in which citizens from the highest classes and students are able to travel freely, along with workers who are ready to be exploited. For the rest of us, it will be catastrophic, but business will be fine with the growth of the German industry, and maybe even some outlets for our agriculture. Even the far right-wing can agree on a large internal market. What used to be a spirit of cooperation will not exist anymore. Poles, Hungarians and others will see Europe as a cash machine supplying them with financial support, and Germany will keep seeing it as a marvellous space for future market openings and factories. I feel that we are not far from the 1930’s, just without the war. I feel war being waged against the poor almost everywhere, against foreigners that we do not want to accept anymore, and I feel the ubiquitous presence of a logic of increased privatisation.

A wake-up call may of course come, and politics would not make any sense if this wasn’t a possibility. We should not always see the worst in people, as there remains an ability to love and to express solidarity. But for this to happen, the political class has to press the right buttons. I often talk about Jaurès, or a person able to help people regain their dignity and mobilise by shaping the right narrative and finding the right tune, but we do not have this today. I doubt that we can currently find the right people to launch this movement, but I am convinced that it exists. I thought Macron was going to engage a dynamic of reconciliation, but it has been a disappointing cold shower. »

Interview conducted by Lucie Solem - President of EuroCité