

## I'm not a Blair. I'm a real socialist says Royal

BY CHARLES BREMNER

The favourite to be France's next President is mending fences with the Left



Royal is the people's favourite, but critics say that behind the fluttering eyelashes and angelic smile lies a hard, violent woman (Jean-Pierre Muller/AFP/Getty Images)

SÉGOLÈNE ROYAL is an admirer of Tony Blair. But as her bid to win the Socialist nomination for France's presidency gathers pace she has begun to make clear that she remains an old-style leftist.

For months Mme Royal's party rivals have been demonising her as a Blair-like reformer who will expose France to the mercy of the free markets. Until now the favourite had revealed little of her plans for the economy, but she is showing her hand in the campaign for the party endorsement next month. A glimpse of the Socialist star at work this week in her western fiefdom showed that President Royal — should she win next spring — would keep business under a firm state hand in the old Gallic way.

"The capitalists have to be frightened," she told *The Times*. "There is no alternative. They can't just dispose of people as they wish. They have to be held accountable." Mme Royal, 53, was chatting in the corridor of the Poitou-Charentes council, in Poitiers, a pretty medieval city. She has presided there since 2004 when she became the first woman elected to run one of France's 22 regions.

Mme Royal had just offered her support to unionists from Aubade, a brand of luxury lingerie, who are fighting plans to close a local factory and move production to Tunisia. "We have to prevent this wildcat outsourcing," she said. "The workers have no power. We need to tax businesses who want to move out jobs and tax their products when they re-import them."

Such talk may be anathema to the business world and pro-market reformers, but it is music to voters who see Mme Royal as a Joan of Arc who will bring new moral leadership to France while shoring up the old protective state.

Mme Royal, whose rank as France's most popular politician should guarantee her the Socialist nomination, has won favour with Blair-style tough-on-crime rhetoric. She says that she admires some of the British leader's policies, on youth employment and life-long training for example, but she remains wedded to French leftist doctrines of strong job protection and a firm state hand on the economy. She also came out on Europe this week, supporting "social harmonisation" and promising to put an end to Britain's opt-out from the Union's 48-hour maximum working week. She also wants Europe to fight the export of jobs to low-cost countries.

Mme Royal's ideas are on display in Poitou-Charentes. She has been using her region as a test-bed for the policies that she will take to the Elysée Palace if she wins next May.

Her creed is what she calls participative democracy — initiatives to give citizens more say in running schools, local government and other services. This has won her admiration since her election victory ended 18 years of Conservative control, much of it under the presidency of Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the last Prime Minister.

She has also made enemies with what are seen as brutal methods and a dictatorial management style. Opponents, including local Socialists, depict the glamorous Parisienne as a control freak and call her names such as “the Valkyrie” and “la tueuse” (the killer).

Elisabeth Morin, a conservative who inherited the regional presidency from M Raffarin in 2002, believes that Mme Royal is unqualified to manage France: “A lot of people are discovering that behind Mme Royal’s fluttering eyelashes and angelic smile lies a person who is violent, hard and sectarian,” said Mme Morin.

The former schools inspector accuses her successor as president of dismantling big, long-term projects in order to court popularity with small hand-out schemes such as vouchers for schoolbooks, one-euro train tickets to the coast and subsidies for rainwater collectors. One of the items that she axed was a subsidy to Ryanair for its popular services from Britain to Poitiers and La Rochelle.

*La Méthode Royal*, and the ruffled feathers that it causes, were showcased in a council session this week. She hustled the 55 members through an agenda loaded with typical initiatives — the creation of a life-long learning agency, subsidies for a centre of excellence in health services, the promotion of culture in high schools and funding for digital networks.

Never dropping her smile, Madame la Presidente silenced those who interrupted. She admonished chattering councillors with a brisk “No talking during the session!”. She put down Henri de Richemont, the Conservative leader, who attacked her for failing to invite the opposition to a council luncheon. “From your energy, I see that you did not come here hungry,” she said. M de Richmont, who is an eminent maritime lawyer, said that he deplored her “intolerable anti-democratic methods”.

Mme Royal’s defenders say that the anti-Royalists are those who have been shaken by her whirlwind administration. “The criticism is coming from people whose advice was not followed,” said Jean-François Macaire, a council vice-president and Socialist party secretary for the region. “She is an extremely dynamic woman and she is very demanding of herself and others,” he added.

The Royalists admire the way that she has made the most of the limited powers of a regional council to advance youth employment, education, transport and the environment and involve people in community schemes. Mme Royal runs the council part-time, making day trips on the high-speed train from the Paris home which she shares with François Hollande, her partner and Socialist Party leader.

Marie Legrand, a Greens party vice-president on the council, says: “At the beginning she was inexperienced. She had never run an elected body. She had trouble delegating and she tried to control everything for a few months. But she has totally changed and I would like her to do nationally as she is doing here.”