

The dark side of French politics

"If my skin wasn't as thick as a crocodile's," observed Jean-Marie Le Pen, France's most controversial and hated politician, I'd be dead by now."

No doubt. In recent years, Le Pen has been branded a Nazi, fascist, racist, fanatic and madman. His former best friend, went public with charges, which remain unproven, that Le Pen had murdered an elderly man who had willed a sizable fortune to Le Pen.

As if all this wasn't bad enough, Le Pen has had to endure the supreme indignity of being left by his attractive, younger wife who then went and posed nude for *Playboy*, claiming her ex-husband wasn't giving her any money.

We were sitting on the balcony of Le Pen's hilltop home in suburban St. Cloud, a musty 19th-century mansion filled with French colonial bric-a-brac and statues of Joan of Arc. A splendid view of Paris spread out below us; from where we talked, Prussian cannon in 1870 had brought Paris to surrender. I looked around for security, mindful of the frequent threats Le Pen received but all I observed were a few strands of unthreatening barbed wire and a friendly little dog.

Le Pen, a burly former fisherman, farmer and para-trooper, is president of the far-right National Front which commands 10-12% of the national vote. France's political right counts for about 60% of the electorate but is deeply divided into warring factions led by Jacques Chirac, Valerie Giscard d'Estaing and Le Pen. They have all the venom for one another of women who arrive at a chic Paris soiree wearing the same gown.

The main problem for France's splintered right is that it can't beat Francois Mitterrand's ruling socialists without Le Pen but won't get into bed with him for fear of losing its moderate supporters.

Though Le Pen has a broad political platform, he is



Eric MARGOLIS
in Paris

largely associated with one burning issue — immigration. Says Le Pen, "Immigration means colonization."

France, he claims, is being "swamped" by Third World immigrants from Africa, the Mideast and Asia. "I'm not against immigrants, just immigration." Le Pen advocates a racially and culturally homogenous Europe. Immigrants must be kicked out of France and sent back to their native lands.

Such ideas are anathema to the liberal elite that runs France's government and media. As in Canada, they espouse more or less open borders, multiculturalism and racial mixing.

There's no question that Le Pen shouts out what many Frenchmen whisper. He touches a deep nerve among the French who despise politicians as useless, effete aristocrats or thieves. Le Pen plays the role of a man of the people, citing his grandparents from Brittany who were illiterate and couldn't even speak French. In person, Le Pen is charming, often funny and engaging. He also looks rather battered and tired.

But during our long talk which Le Pen reluctantly ended under duress from his secretary, another, darker side emerged.

"We are on the way to losing our country," he warns. To whom? To a conspiracy, he answers, of Freemasons and Jewish financiers who are working to produce a socialist Europe filled with "half-breeds."

"Jews here in France urge multiculturalism and racial mixing but in Israel they practise racism." Lest I possibly think him anti-Semitic, Le Pen quickly adds that he has both Jews and Arabs in the National Front. He's not against Jews, just against the "international Jewish conspiracy to corrupt the West."

Le Pen is no modern storm trooper but a throwback to the old, traditional French right wing of the 1930s and '40s. Call him the last of the Petanists, the men who made the Vichy regime. He favors big families, the Church, Christian values and a moral reawakening.

"We must save France from degeneracy," he says. The real enemies of France are communism, racial degeneration, and the "Jewish left."

A tingle went down my spine as I listened to Le Pen and watched the late afternoon sun play on the Eiffel Tower. Deep in the heart of a France heading into the next century was a dark memory from the dark past.

"Don't speak to me of Le Pen," a publisher told me with disgust later at dinner, "my relatives died at Ravensbruck."

Did Le Pen have advice for Canada? "Yes, you're being colonized by the Third World, too." Keep your European ethnic and cultural background. Your politicians are cowards and hypocrites.

In the unlikely case that Le Pen ever became prime minister of France, would he back an independent Quebec? No, he answered. Quebec as a civilization must be protected, but Quebec's rights are amply guaranteed in the Canadian federal system.

I took my leave of Monsieur Le Pen and the France of the 1940s and drove slowly back into Paris, which was being washed, scrubbed and regilded for its triumphant entry into the new united Europe of 1992. Along the way black Africans were sweeping the streets and sad-looking Algerians queued up for buses.