

François Hollande seems like the European Left's answer to George W. Bush, a disaster-prone buffoon who somehow makes it to the top and then wrecks his country. The comparison doesn't quite work, however: Bush II, for all his flaws, had charm, some good fortune, and some political skill: he was re-elected, remember. François Hollande seems to have no redeeming qualities and rotten luck to boot. From its first day, when his plane was struck by lightning en route to Angela Merkel, his presidency has been plagued by disasters. He inspires nothing but contempt and mirth. The polls suggest 'Monsieur Flanby' — the nickname comes from the popular French pudding — is the most unpopular French President of all time. He goes from awkward gaffe to awkward gaffe, and we all laugh because it is funny.

But the Hollande presidency isn't just a farce: it's a tragedy too. France's manufacturing sector is now performing worse than Greece. Last Spring Hollande promised to bring down France's rising unemployment, but figures published on Boxing Day revealed that French joblessness has risen again. His incompetence and high-spending policies have reduced the Fifth Republic to the sort of desperately poor shape it was in under Mitterand in the early 1980s — yet in his new year address he still had the nerve to argue that, while he may have to cut taxes a little, austerity was the problem, not the answer.

Jingoistic commentators in Britain might cheer at the misery on the other side of the channel, especially since it puts greater strain on the dysfunctional European Union and as the French rich keep pouring their wealth into London to escape Hollande's punitive taxes. But France's possible collapse can't be something to celebrate, and it may end up giving us more immigration headaches in the longer run.

Hollande's strategy now seems to be to fight every war going abroad and to ignore his centre-right opponents at home, the struggling l'UMP. He chooses instead to pitch himself against the Front National, the rising force in French politics. Presumably his hope is that the public will, when it comes to *le crunch*, choose him over the far right. But that's wishful thinking: the polls suggest that the new-look FN of Marine Le Pen, which can no longer be brushed aside as an 'extremist' group even if nasty elements remain (see Daniel Hannan's brilliant *Spectator* cover piece this week), will emerge as the clear winner at the next French European elections. Le Pen may even land the presidency in 2017. If that happens, right-thinking pundits everywhere will shriek in horror, but they can hardly blame the French: nothing could be worse than five more years of Flanby.