

### **A donkey runs for parliament – Paris, 1899**

**Introduction:** The French radical Zo d'Axa ran a Paris-based journal in 1899, "La Feuille," which achieved notoriety when it sponsored a donkey as candidate for the Chamber of Deputies.

During the electoral period the donkey's poster-programme was pasted up on the walls, and on the day of the vote the satirical donkey candidate travelled through Paris from Montmartre to the Latin Quarter, passing through crowds that were alternately enthusiastic or scandalized. At Boulevard du Palais, the donkey was eventually arrested by the police and hauled off to the pound.

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#### **PART 1**

##### **HE IS ELECTED**

Listen to the edifying story of a pretty little white donkey, a parliamentary candidate in the capital. It isn't a Mother Goose rhyme, or a story from *Le Petit Journal*. It's a true story for the old kiddies who still vote:

A *burro*, a son of the country of Lafontaine and Rabelais, a donkey so white that M. Vervoort gluttonously ate it, aspired – in the electoral game – to a place as legislator. The day of the elections having arrived, this *burro*, answering to the name of Worthless, a most excellent candidate, pulled off a last minute manoeuvre.

On this hot Sunday morning in May, when the people were hurrying to the polling booths, the candidate, the white donkey called Worthless, perched on a triumphal wagon and pulled along by voters, traversed Paris, his good city.

Upright on his hoofs, ears to the wind, proudly emerging from his vehicle gaudily painted with electoral posters – a vehicle in the shape of an urn – the head high between the water glass and the presidential bell he passed through the anger, the bravos and the gibes.

The donkey looked looked out over a Paris that gazed on him.

Paris! The Paris that votes, the crowd, the people sovereign every four years...the people sufficiently foolish to believe that sovereignty consists in naming its masters.

As if parked in front of the town halls were flocks of voters, the dazed, fetishists who held the little cards with which they say: I abdicate.

Mr. Anyone will represent them. He will represent them all the better in that he represents no ideas. And it'll be fine. We'll make laws, we'll balance the budget. The laws will be more chains; the budget will be new taxes...

Slowly the donkey passed through the streets.

Along the way, the walls were being covered with posters by members of his committee, while others distributed his proclamations to the crowd:

"Think carefully, dear citizens. You know that your representatives are fooling you, have fooled you, will fool you – yet still you go to vote. So vote for me! Elect the donkey!...I'm not any dumber than you."

This frankness – a little brutal – wasn't to everyone's taste.

"We're being insulted," some of them said.

"Universal suffrage is being mocked," others more accurately cried out.

Someone angrily brandished his fist at the donkey and said:

"Filthy Jew!"

But elsewhere loud laughs were heard. The candidate was acclaimed. Bravely, the voters mocked both themselves and their elected representatives. Hats waved, canes. Women threw flowers...

The donkey passed.

He descended from high in Montmartre towards the Latin Quarter. He crossed the *Grands Boulevards*, le Croissant where, without salt, the stuff is cooked that the gazettes sell. He saw the Halles where the starving – the Sovereign People – pick through piles of rubbish; the riverside quays where the voters choose bridges as their lodgings...

The heart and the brain! This was Paris! This was democracy!

We are all brothers, old vagabonds! Pity the bourgeois! He's got gout... and he's your brother, you people without bread, you man without work, you worn-out mother who will go home tonight to die with her little ones...

We are all brothers, young conscript! It's your brother the officer down there, with his girl's corset and forehead covered with bars. Salute! Fix bayonets! In line! The Code awaits you – the military code. Twelve bullets in your skin for a gesture. It's the republican tariff.

The donkey arrived before the Senate.

He rolled alongside the palace, where guards pushed each other on leaving. He continued along the outside (alas!) of the too-green gardens. The he reached the Boulevard St-Michel. On the café terraces people clapped. The crowd, ceaselessly growing, grabbed copies of the proclamations. Students hooked themselves to the wagon, a professor pushed the wheels...

And as three o'clock sounded, the police appeared.

Since 10:00am, from post to commissariat, the telegraph and the telephone had signalled the strange passage of this subversive animal. Orders were issued to bring him in: Arrest the donkey! Now the city watchmen blocked the candidate's route.

Near the Place St-Michel, Worthless's faithful committee was summoned by the armed forces to bring the candidate to the nearest police station. Naturally, the Committee passed over this order; right over the Seine, where the wagon soon stopped in front of the Palace of Justice.

More numerous now, the *sergents de ville*, surrounded the unmoved donkey. The Candidate was arrested at the gate of the Palace of Justice from which Deputies, swindlers and all the great thieves exit as free men.

The wagon lurched from the movements of the crowd. The agents, the brigadier in the lead, seized the shafts and put on the breast-harness. The Committee didn't insist; they harnessed up the *sergents de ville*.

It was thus that the white donkey was released by his most fervent partisans. Like a vulgar politician, the animal went in the wrong direction. The police re-attached him, and Authority guided his route...From that moment on, Worthless was nothing but an official candidate. His friends no longer knew him. The Prefecture opened wide its doors, and the donkey entered as if it were his home.

...if we speak about this today it's to let the people know – the people of Paris and the countryside, workers, peasants, bourgeois, proud Citizens, dear lords – that the white donkey Worthless has been elected. He has been elected in Paris. He has been elected in the provinces. Add up the white and the voided ballots, add the abstentions, the voices and the silences that normally gather to signify disgust or contempt. A little bit of statistics, if you please, and you can easily verify that in all districts the *monsieur* who is fraudulently proclaimed deputy didn't receive a quarter of the votes. From this flows the imbecilic locution "Relative Majority." You might as well say that at night it's relatively day.

And in this way the incoherent, brutal Universal Suffrage, which is based on number – and doesn't even have that – will perish in ridicule. In speaking of the elections in France

the gazettes of the entire world, without any malice, brought together the two most notable facts of the day:

“In the morning, around 9:00, M. Felix Faure went to vote. In the afternoon, at 3:00, the white donkey was arrested.”

I read this in three hundred newspapers. I was encumbered with clippings from *The Argus* and the *Courrier de la Presse*. There were reports in English, Wallachian, Spanish...which I nevertheless understood.

Each time that I read Felix Faure, I was sure that they were speaking of the donkey.

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## **PART 2**

### **THE DONKEY’S SPEECH TO THE ELECTORATE**

The following text is a document from campaign by the Paris satirical magazine *La Feuille* to run a donkey named Worthless for the Chamber of Deputies

#### **VOTERS:**

In presenting myself for your votes, I owe you a few words. Here they are:

I come from an old French family “I dare to say”, and am a pedigree donkey, a donkey in the good sense of the word: four paws and hair all over.

My name is Worthless, which is what my competitors in this race are.

I am white, as are many of the votes that have been cast and not counted, but which will now belong to me.

My election is assured.

You will understand that I speak frankly.

#### **CITIZENS:**

You are being fooled. It is said that the last Chamber, *made up of imbeciles and thieves*, didn’t represent the majority of voters. This is false.

On the contrary, a Chamber made up of deputies who are ninnies and thieves perfectly represents the voters you are. Don’t protest; a nation has the delegates it deserves.

*Why did you elect them?*

Amongst yourselves you don’t hesitate to say that the more things change the more they remain the same; that your representatives mock you and think only of their own interests, of vainglory, or of money.

So why would you elect them again tomorrow?

You know full well that the whole lot of those you would send to the legislature would sell their votes for a check, and would sell jobs, functions and tobacco offices.

But who are the tobacco offices, positions and sinecures for if not the Electoral Committees that are also paid?

The shepherds of the Committees are less naïve than the flock.

The Chamber represents the whole.

Idiots and crafty devils are needed; a parliament of old fools and Robert Macaires [1] is needed to embody at one and the same time professional voters and depressed workers.

*And that’s what you are!*

You are being fooled, good voters, you are being deceived and fawned over when you are told that you are handsome, that you are justice itself, law, national sovereignty, the

people-king, free men...Your votes are bought like at a candy store, and you are the candy...Suckers.

You continue to be fooled. You are told that France is still France. This isn't true.

With each passing day France loses all meaning in the world, all liberal meaning. It is no longer a hardy, risk-taking, idea-spreading, cult-smashing country. It's Marianne kneeling before the throne of autocrats. It's *corporalisme* reborn more hypocritically than in Germany: a tonsure under the kepi.

You are being fooled, fooled without cease. They talk to you about fraternity, and never has *the struggle for bread* been sharper or more deadly.

They talk to you "you who have nothing" about patriotism and our sacred patrimony.

They talk to you about integrity, and it's the pirates of the press, the journalists ready to do anything, the master deceivers and blackmailers who sing of national honor.

The supporters of the Republic, the petit-bourgeois, the little lords are tougher on the "rogues" than the masters of the former regimes. *We live under the supervisors' eye.*

The weakened workers "the producers who consume nothing" content themselves with patiently sucking at the bone without marrow that is thrown to them, the bone of universal suffrage. And it's only to tell stories, to engage in electoral discussions, that they move their jaws, the jaws that no longer know how to bite.

And when, on occasion, the children of the people shake themselves from their torpor they find themselves, like at Fourmies, [2] face to face with our brave army...and the reasoning of the Lebel guns puts lead in their heads.

Justice is the same for all. The honorable thieves of Panama travel in carriages and don't know the cart. But *handcuffs* squeeze the wrists of the old workers who are arrested as vagabonds.

The ignominy of the present moment is such that no candidate dares defend this society. The bourgeois-leaning politicians: the reactionaries, the liberals, the masks, the false noses, the republicans, cry out that in voting for them things will work better, things will work well. Those who have already taken everything from you ask for still more.

*Give your votes, Citizens!*

The beggars, the candidates, the thieves, the vote-squeezers all have a special way to make and re-make the Public Good.

Listen to the brave workers, the party quacks; they want to conquer power...in order to better suppress it.

Others invoke the Revolution, and they fool themselves while fooling you. Voters will never make the Revolution. Universal suffrage was created precisely to prevent virile action. Charley has a good time voting...

And even if some incident drew men onto the streets; and even if by some strong act a group went into action, what could we wait and hope for of the crowd we see swarming about, the *cowardly and empty-headed crowd*?

*Allez!* Go ahead men of the crowd! Go ahead, voters! To the urns...and don't complain. It's enough. Don't try to inspire pity because of the fate you imposed upon yourselves. Afterwards don't insult the *Masters* that you gave yourselves.

*These masters are your equals* as they steal from you. They are doubtless worth more: they're worth 25 francs a day, not counting their small profit. And this is very good.

*The voter is nothing but a failed candidate.*

The little people "of small savings and small hopes, rapacious small merchants, slow-moving domestic folk" need a mediocre parliament that will mint and synthesize *all that is vile in the nation.*

So vote, voters! Vote! Parliaments emanate from you. A thing is because it must be, because it can't be otherwise. Put in place a Chamber in your image. A dog returns to its vomit. Return to your deputies....

**NOTES**

1. Character of a bandit in a popular play by Frederic Lemaitre.
2. Site of a May Day rally in 1891 that was brutally put down by the army.

These texts were translated for marxists.org by Mitch Abidor.