

retical universalist philosophy which is hermetic to the experience of a large number of French people," says Ms Diallo. "We refuse to talk about race, so we don't have the words to discuss it. This is denial: a refusal to put words on things that we don't want to recognise."

Much of this push comes from students and those familiar with the American campus debate. Often even the vocabulary is missing in French. Being black at Sciences Po, a group at a Paris university, for instance, calls for classes on "*la critical race theory*", as well as "intersectionality" and "decolonial studies". When you hear talk in France about "white supremacy" or "systemic racism", says Thomas Chatterton Williams, an American writer on race based in Paris, "these are American ways of thinking, which derive from a society built on slavery and oppression."

Up to a point, Mr Macron is sympathetic. When campaigning in 2017, he upset conservative French circles by calling colonisation a "crime against humanity". He agrees that more should be done to teach the full picture of French history, and last year asked Benjamin Stora, a historian, to re-examine the archives on France's colonial history in Algeria. Mr Macron draws the line, however, not only at the idea of sidelining controversial figures in history. He also rejects the "ethnicisation" of French society in ways that could be divisive—particularly regarding extreme forms of Islamism—and undermine universalism. "We're not a country like the United States that has lived through segregation," he told Brut, an online platform.

The challenge for France is whether it can accommodate more explicit racial identities within its existing model, in ways that neither crush genuinely felt differences nor abandon the colour-blind ideal. James Baldwin, an American writer, once commented that in France "I was freed of...the crutches of race." Mr Williams echoes that thought today. "I'm a mixed-race black man," he says, "but in France my identity is primarily my nationality. I'm not the first American to feel liberated by stepping out of the black-white binary."

Some, such as Sibeth Ndiaye, Mr Macron's former government spokesperson, suggest that France should at least debate the question of collecting statistics based on ethnic background. It is harder to measure diversity, let alone prove discrimination, when there is no official recognition of racial groups. The legal case for discrimination currently rests on a plaintiff belonging to a "real or supposed" race and on the perception of racism. For universalism to prosper, wrote Ms Ndiaye in *Le Monde* last year, "we shouldn't hesitate to name things, to say that skin colour isn't neutral."

Part of the difficulty of the debate, says Hakim El Karoui of the Institut Montaigne,

a think-tank, is that inflexible defenders of the French model consider that the mere "recognition of difference is a way of contesting that model". It may be that French universalism is more elastic than its rigid guardians believe. "Until the mid-20th century", says Pap Ndiaye, a French historian and author of "*La Condition Noire*", "we spoke very freely about race, even within the universalist idea." It was only after the second world war and decolonisation that talking about race became illegitimate.

Mr Macron's vision of universalism may be more nuanced than his critics allow. He has often talked about France's plural identities. Recently he said: "We should be able to be fully French and to cultivate another belonging." The challenge will be to get this balance right, while ensuring that those who do not feel fully recognised in France can genuinely prosper in it. ■

Italy

Just what they didn't need

ROME

Matteo Renzi crashes Italy's government in mid-pandemic

ITALIANS USUALLY greet their periodic political crises with cynical resignation. But when, on January 13th, the ministers from Italia Viva, a splinter group led by Matteo Renzi, pulled out of Italy's left-populist government, stripping it of its parliamentary majority, the reaction of many was outrage.

Polls suggest Mr Renzi's tiny party has the support of only about 3% of the electorate. Its leader's approval rating is among the lowest of any prominent Italian politician. By contrast, the prime minister, Giu-



The demolition man does it again

seppe Conte, has far and away the highest.

But Italia Viva's senators are enough to make the difference in the upper house. Mr Renzi said his followers would not obstruct two urgent pending bills. It is clear, however, that Italy now faces yet another bout of political instability—and, this time, in the midst of a pandemic and just as it is about to submit to Brussels its plans for spending its share of the EU's recovery funds. "With 500 dead in the country today because of the coronavirus, Renzi can't find anything better to do than bring down the government on a whim," railed one irate Twitter user.

The withdrawal of Italia Viva leaves Mr Conte with the backing of the centre-left Democratic Party (PD), the ideologically heterogeneous Five Star Movement (M5S) and a small, radical left-wing party. The M5S said that pitching into a political crisis at such a time was incomprehensible. Andrea Orlando, the deputy general secretary of the Democrats, called it "a grave mistake—we shall all for pay for it".

Mr Renzi, a former prime minister who abandoned the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) in 2019, was harshly critical of Mr Conte at a press conference to announce the resignations. But he was careful to leave open several possible solutions to the crisis, even including a reshuffled government under the same leadership.

Since Mr Renzi began his offensive last month, critics have argued that his aim is to become the kingmaker of Italian politics. He maintains he is acting for the good of the country. He claims that Mr Conte has kept too much power to himself, citing the prime minister's control of the intelligence services in particular. He has challenged Mr Conte's reluctance to tap the EU's bailout fund, the European Stability Mechanism, for cash to boost Italy's health services. The EU's pandemic recovery funds are yet another bone of contention: Mr Renzi has objected vigorously to the government's plans for spending the money, estimated at more than €200bn (\$240bn).

Francesco Grillo, whose think-tank, Vision, has prepared a study of the recovery funds, says that in this respect Mr Renzi has a good case. The government's blueprint contains "no real view of where Italy wants to be in five or six years' time, nor a clear roadmap to show how it intends getting there," he says. It allocates almost a quarter of the loans and grants it expects from the EU to tax breaks. These are intended to encourage investment that will make Italy "greener" and "smarter". But, argues Mr Grillo, those criteria are loosely defined and not part of an overall strategy.

The direst outcome to the mess would be an election amid a possible third wave of the pandemic. On current polling, that would deliver power to a hard-right coalition that would doubtless want to re-▶▶

write Italy's recovery-fund proposal. But few in parliament are keen on a vote, not least because the next election will be held under new rules that will reduce the number of seats by around a third.

A more sanguine view is that an assortment of independents and renegades from other parties could be assembled to join forces with the remaining parties in the coalition to support a new government, led either by Mr Conte or some respected establishment figure. That, however, risks producing an even more fragile, and perhaps disreputable, majority. Parliamentary turncoats expect to be pampered and rewarded for their support. They are like extra-marital lovers, a politician famed for his party-hopping warned Mr Conte: "You have to give them dignity, bring them out into the open and recognise their value. Otherwise, they say good-bye." ■

Germany's Christian Democrats

Three men in a Rhineland boat

COLOGNE AND DÜSSELDORF

What Germany's largest state means for its largest party

ON JANUARY 16TH 1,001 parliamentarians, party functionaries and small-town mayors will open their laptops, log into a virtual congress of Germany's ruling centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and elect their party's new leader. The winner will instantly become the favourite to succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor once she steps down after an election in September. Yet on the face of it the delegates do not have much of a choice. The three candidates—Armin Laschet, Norbert Röttgen and Friedrich Merz—are all Catholic trained lawyers aged between 55 and 65. Each has struggled to find a distinct message during an interminable campaign drawn out over almost a year by the pandemic. And all three come from the same state: North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), the most populous of Germany's 16 *Länder*.

NRW's 18m inhabitants—over one-fifth of Germany's total—would make it the seventh-largest country in the European Union. Its 34,000 square km (13,000 square miles) span the urbanised Rhine-Ruhr region, rural Münsterland, the mountainous Eifel and much more. Walloped by deindustrialisation, its rustbelt cities have reinvented themselves as hubs for retail, logistics and other services. Farther east, the small and medium-sized firms of the *Mittelstand* in Westphalia rival anything in Bavaria or Baden-Württemberg for technical specialisation and export prowess. The traditional gulf between carnivalesque

Rhinelanders and dour Westphalians has been complicated by high immigration that has turned NRW into one of Germany's most cosmopolitan states. "NRW is a miniature Germany," says Dennis Radtke, a CDU member of the European Parliament from the Ruhr. "If you can run the state, you can run the country."

For decades NRW was a stronghold of the Social Democrats (SPD), thanks in part to the large coal-and-steel workforce in Ruhr conurbations like Dortmund. But it has mattered at least as much to the CDU. It was partly in what was to become this multi-denominational state that its founding fathers agreed that post-war Germany needed a big-tent Christian *Volkspartei* (people's party) that could overcome the class and religious differences that had bedevilled Weimar-era politics.

Early meetings in Cologne and Bad Godesburg, near Bonn, set the party's path and determined its name. The "Düsseldorf guidelines", laid out in 1949, shaped the principles of West Germany's "social market" economy. This blend of market capitalism, social protection and labour rights underpinned the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) that followed—largely under the leadership of the CDU's Konrad Adenauer, a former mayor of Cologne elected in 1949 as the country's first post-war chancellor, and of Ludwig Erhard, his finance minister and successor as chancellor.

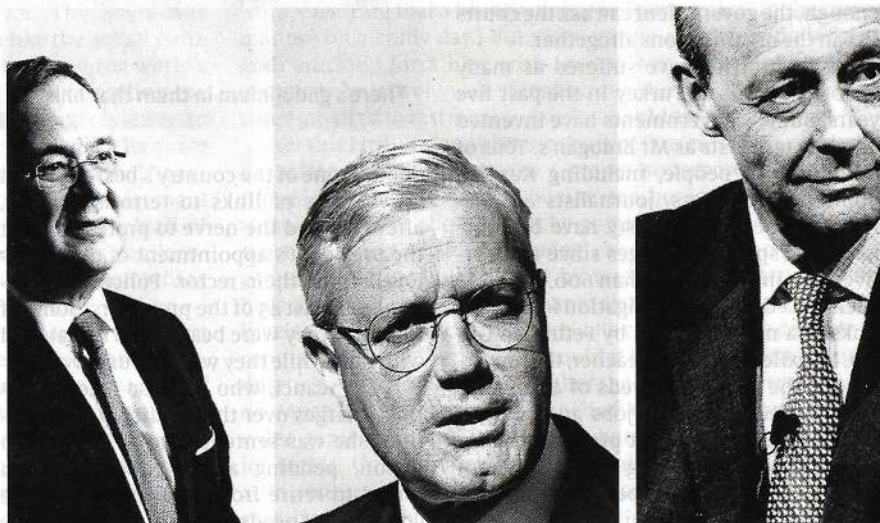
In the 2000s the SPD's grip loosened and NRW started to swing. State elections took on an outsized importance. A crushing loss in 2012 shattered the CDU's morale; a narrow win in 2017 restored it. These results resonate today among the NRW delegates—almost a third of the total—tasked with choosing their party's new leader. For it was Mr Röttgen who led the CDU to that 2012 defeat, an ignominy that poisoned his reputation among party colleagues in NRW and saw Mrs Merkel fire him from her cabi-

net as environment minister. "These are emotions you don't forget quickly," says Florian Braun, a CDU member of the NRW state parliament.

After that loss Mr Laschet, a moderate in the Merkel vein, slowly revived the demoralised party and led it to victory five years later, building a national reputation in the process. Today he leads a broadly successful coalition in NRW with the Free Democrats, a small liberal party. Soon after the CDU leadership was vacated last February Mr Laschet recruited to his campaign Jens Spahn, Germany's popular health minister, yet another North Rhine-Westphalian. As for Mr Merz, he is from the Sauerland, a largely rural part of Westphalia, but has no history in state politics. The most conservative of the three candidates, he draws much of his support from states like Hesse and Baden-Württemberg.

All this helps explain why Mr Laschet ends the CDU campaign as the narrow favourite, ahead of Mr Merz. After a wobbly performance during the covid crisis he polls poorly with voters, but the delegates are a different bunch, often elected officials who want a leader they think will help them keep their jobs. His is a pragmatic conservatism, shaped by the needs of a complex state, focused on bread-and-butter concerns, and with an ear—too acute, say some—for the concerns of industry.

Mr Laschet's backers praise his ability to build bridges and meld opposing points of view, while rivals acknowledge his skill in working across party lines. His jocular, modest Rhenish bearing contrasts with the silky erudition of Mr Röttgen or the flinty arrogance of Mr Merz. If it is hard to spot any fundamental beliefs in Mr Laschet beyond a staunchly Catholic pro-life attitude, that may be no great sin. After all, Mrs Merkel has run Germany successfully for 15 years and no one is quite sure what she stands for either. ■



Laschet, Röttgen, Merz: spot the difference