

Democracy, Doctors and Dancing: winter in Entre-deux-Eaux, Year 6 weeks 32 - 45

Winter here is a time for village hibernation, hospital operations, logging and muck-spreading. There has been very little snow this year, the sunny days have enticed us out on walks, but the dull grey days in between have just encouraged the withdrawn life of reading, computers, meals, TV and wood fires. So not much news!

However, today, 9th March, is an important day for the future of Entre-deux-Eaux. It is election day for the commune's council and mayor. The last municipal election was six years ago, a couple of months before we moved here. So we decided to take our new democratic responsibilities seriously, for we can vote in municipal and European elections, though not cantonal and certainly not national ones (we're not responsible for Sarko).

The election boards in most communes are plastered with the photos of rival party leaders, each of whom has a proposed list of candidates. However there is no such political rivalry in Entre-deux-Eaux. We just got a single hand-delivered letter in our post box inviting us to a meeting with the present mayor and council, all of whom (apart from one) are standing for re-election on a united front, whatever their personal politics. We received no rival communications, and later heard that no opposition had dared to present itself for election.

So on Wednesday night, when most good farmers are going to bed, we ventured out into the frosty night to hear the achievements, manifesto and debate. The turn-out was limited, and the mayor lamented the fact that newcomers hadn't come to find out more about their decision-makers. He regarded his two Brits with some uncertainty initially (there are communes, after all, where the English have taken over the council and even the mayoral position and John did shout at him once when he was digging up trees on the edge of our land without explanation!). But in the end, when we had held our tongues and made no criticisms, he permitted himself to introduce us to the rest of the audience and even to promise that our road was on the programme for repairs this year.

The mayor, flanked by his faithful councillors (had Farmer Duhaut, one of his two deputies, had a neat haircut and shave for the occasion?) first outlined the virtues of the outgoing council. Firstly independence: Entre-deux-Eaux has remained fiercely independent, refusing to join with surrounding communes to form a canton or community of communes, in which Entre-deux-Eaux's interests would be submerged and we'd be paying out for other communes' ambitious follies. [Others might deduce that Entre-deux-Eaux has its head firmly buried in the sand and will never make progress!]. Secondly stability: Entre-deux-Eaux had been successfully steered for the last twenty five years, after the overthrow of the previous disastrous mayor, by many of the present council. [Could be seen as a lack of new ideas]. Thirdly prudence: local taxes had remained the lowest of all the surrounding communes [Some might say there is a corresponding lack of new facilities and some huge increases when imposed changes have to be implemented]. And finally it is a welcoming

community. Most of his audience looked surprised when he mentioned the welcome extended to newcomers and the invitation to join in all the activities. "What activities?" asked a lady in the front row. "The club of the third age is very lively and there is always cake", replied the mayor. As most of the incomers are young couples and families, this was not over-convincing.

After outlining the future programme of road repairs and obligatory sewerage the mayor asked, rather nervously if there were any questions. I'm not sure what you'd expect to be the big issues for Entre-deux-Eaux. But they turned out to be: Sewerage, Teenagers and Crosses.

Being a rural community, everyone is perfectly accustomed to having a *fosse septique* for their sewage, even if they don't comply with recent regulations about having them emptied every four years by a qualified firm. So the idea of Europe imposing an expensive system of piping and centralised treatment is not popular. Entre-deux-Eaux's 450 residents are insufficient to merit their own sewage treatment plant. And since the commune occupies two sides of a hill, its sewage would have to flow in two directions or involve expensive pumping. The nearest treatment facility on our side of the hill is in Saulcy-sur-Meurthe, which already has more than it can cope with (and Mandray also wants to use the facility). An earnest lecture then followed from the councillor who works at the Saulcy facility. Sadly there are incomers there who don't like the fields round them being sprayed with treated sewage, and other disposal options are very expensive. It was suggested from the floor that if the mayor wants a well-attended meeting, the topic of sewerage would attract a large audience.

A man at the back started to raise an issue dear to his heart, whereupon a furious onslaught from the councillors' table at the front was unleashed. It turned out that the man had been foolish enough to try and speak at a Council Meeting, and everyone knows that you can't do that, - you are only allowed to observe the wisdom of the elders. So they had all decided that they would not listen to him at all as he was an extremely rude and abusive man. However, in perfectly reasonable tones, the man proceeded to say that if he didn't speak up for the young people of the village, who would? All they wanted was some kind of facility (even a bus shelter to congregate in appeared to be an issue - it would attract the vandalising riff-raff of other communes).

When he had been shouted down on that issue, he, again in a perfectly reasonable tone of voice, mentioned the disappearing *calvaires* of Entre-deux-Eaux. Over the ages carved stone crosses have been erected at several road junctions in the village and the French language entry for Entre-deux-Eaux on Wikipedia mentions its *Promenade des Calvaires* (along with the 18th century church, the ruins of the mines and the characteristic architectural style with double doors for the hay-wains). We too had been saddened by the vanishing heritage. The cross at the bottom of our road was the first disappearance we registered. It was in fact a wooden one with a rather fine bronze sculpted figure of Jesus. John used his photo of a bicycle leaning against it for a long-ago Christmas card. But the commune employee dug it up when a large cistern (containing a pump providing water from Saint Leonard to the village) was installed, and for several years, on the pretext that the wood was rotting, he

has been reluctant to replace the cross. Another *calvaire* has either disappeared beneath or been demolished by a large pile of gravel at a crossroads opposite the famous cherry tree. This was probably the cross to which the mayor referred when he answered that its re-installation was being delayed until it was decided whether to construct a roundabout on the site. Then recently we noticed the stone cross beyond Vozelle's farm lying in sections on the ground, looking as if a large lorry or muck-spreader had toppled it. What pertinent questions the dissident was asking, we thought.

Another bit of local history then surfaced. The above-mentioned cherry tree. During the last war two unfortunate young resistance workers from Plainfaing had been hanged from the tree after they were captured by the Germans following an allied parachute drop of guns and equipment. Sadly the tree had been chopped down after Christmas. The mayor replied that he had notified Plainfaing's mayor that it was rotten and unsafe, and it was they, as those responsible for the memorial and the tree, who had cut it down. (One of our two cherry trees blew down this winter, after becoming dead and rotten, so we understood the problem). However, he said, there were no plans to replace the tree. Our parsimonious council seems to have no feeling for history or landscape. Who would think that our mayor used to be a teacher!

Unlike Entre-deux-Eaux, Saint Dié has four rival lists of election candidates: The present ruling Socialists, the Right, the Left, and the Communists. So their mayor has to be out publicising himself at every opportunity. He draws attention, in the monthly newsletter to Saint Dié residents, to his vast program for reform, civic improvements and culture, and is photographed with his team in front of each road widening, new roundabout, local meeting and cultural event. So it was not surprising to see him at February's AGM of the Saint Dié Walking Group. That might seem a non-political venue, but he shrewdly promised the group new headquarters, and it was a well attended meeting, thanks to the practise of offering champagne and holding a three-course lunch after the AGM. After the shambles of the Walking Group AGM a couple of years ago, it was a relief to see that the new committee seemed to have got affairs back onto an even keel. The meeting ran to time, the elections were undisputed, and concerns were noted and action promised. We also stood in a minute's silence for a delightful nonagenarian Auguste who had died during the course of the year (apparently his coffin had been borne into the packed church with his walking poles and cap on top.) Proceedings were only disrupted when the ex-President arrived half way through and insisted on walking round shaking hands with people and talking very loudly to them!

The museum curator was more firm about electioneering when the Mayor of Saint Dié turned up to the opening of the water-colour exhibition at the museum. He said that the mayor was there as a fellow-artist and exhibitor, and so could not address the throng. However, the mayor networked efficiently after the speeches, and I was nearly presented to him, on the assumption that I was Nicola (who'd been invited to exhibit two paintings).

However, we didn't see Saint Dié's mayor at the annual Amnesty Book Fair yesterday. No doubt he had more pressing pre-occupations. Although he could well have set up a photo-opportunity earlier in the day. In the foreign

language section we found plenty of English books to rummage through, to supplement our reading matter. John idly fingered an account of our queen's coronation and a lavishly illustrated children's book on Red Indians, and I bought some Arnold Bennett.

Mention of Nicola leads me on to doctors. For it was on her recommendation that we'd first gone to Dr T in Saint Dié (when I needed a repeat prescription). Nicola felt his heavy bookshelves, bound medical volumes, and enormous leather-topped desk were reassuring. And I found that he was perfectly OK at doling out repeat prescriptions, though his appointment system seemed a little old fashioned. You just turn up at the surgery waiting room, count the number of people already there, and calculate whether the doctor can fit you in before lunch, at a work-rate of 15 mins per patient. (Patient etiquette also requires that you simultaneously greet the entire waiting room, and later bid them farewell when your turn arrives). Each appointment costs 22 euro, payable across the leather-topped desk directly to the doctor. Home visits cost more, so locums have found that Dr T seemed quite happy to fit home visits in between patients' hair appointments, instead of making them come into the surgery. I began to be aware that Dr T felt that it was uneconomic therefore for him to deal with two matters in one consultation. He even said that writing a repeat prescription and also filling in three boxes in an necessary official form were too much for one 15 minute appointment. I'd also found him completely unhelpful recently over the skin cancer, merely saying that having referred me to a dermatologist, it was no longer his concern.

John had never felt that Dr T was concerned with the whole patient, and had long since stopped going to him, although under the new health regulations, you are meant to declare your doctor. So when he wanted a flu injection this winter he decided to try the practice of the two doctors in the next village, Saulcy-sur-Meurthe. We were impressed, when we went through the door, to discover that the doctors shared a secretary and had an appointment system. Also small children were not expected to wait in silence on adult wooden chairs, but were provided with toys. So John booked in, and I accompanied him.

We were further impressed when the new doctor explained that they were a community based practice, limiting numbers so as to serve their community better, but as Entre-deux-Eaux has no doctor, he was prepared to accept John. Whereupon he took a full medical history, and decided to tackle John's blood pressure, cholesterol and painful knees as a first priority in improving his general fitness and health. So John walked out with prescriptions for blood tests, X-rays and MRI scans - as well as having had his flu injection. We did observe that the appointments system was in fact no more efficient than Dr T's, as the new doctor spends so much time on each patient that you always wait at least half an hour, even if the waiting room is empty! That first appointment lasted over an hour and the next wasn't much shorter.

Following the knee scans, Dr P wrote John a prescription for the consultant of his choice. It is a bit difficult to choose when you don't know the consultants. Though as Madame Laine was in pain from knee surgery at Saint Dié, and Madame Georgeon (further along our road) was about to have a knee operation

in Epinal, there were some satisfaction ratings available. When pressed, Dr P recommended another Epinal surgeon.

We had an early morning appointment in Epinal. The surgeon decided not to operate as he thought that what John needed was more exercise to build up the muscles above his knees. So he recommended swimming, cycling and walking with air-cushioned shoes, and he wrote a prescription for twenty sessions of physiotherapy. So then John had to choose a physiotherapist. None of this waiting around for an appointment to be sent to you. You just make your own appointment with the person of your choice. A new practice has just opened between Saulcy and Sainte Marguerite, so John presented himself there, but so far he doesn't seem too impressed with actions. And treatment has been halted during a debilitating cold. Meanwhile I have transferred my affections to Dr P as well - though have not managed to get my notes transferred from Dr T (fortunately, in France the patient gets copies of all tests and consultants' reports and retains x-rays etc., so it is only the doctor's own notes which need to be transferred - and from what we have seen Dr T's notes seem rather skimpy).

I can't remember if John used his dodgy knees as an excuse for not attending the Sainte Marguerite pensioners *galette des rois* in January. He certainly found it extremely boring in previous years. But then he's not a great one for dancing! The festivities started with everyone sitting at tables sipping champagne in a decorous manner. But soon the dancing started, with much whirling and twirling and complicated steps (no one just shuffles uncomfortably). Then there was a slight pause for the eating of the almond-flavoured epiphany tart. Each galette contained a charm, and one lucky finder had to put on a gold cardboard crown and be "Queen" and dance with another who was "King", which occasioned much hilarity. After more dancing, a chunk of *brioche* was served, and later still some coffee. By this time things were getting really animated, with whole tables performing a stand-up, sit-down, clap-hands routine, and the ever-popular line-dancing. With the pace getting too hot, the oldest Scrabble player and I beat a retreat at that point.

The next dance in Entre-deux-Eaux seems to be that of the Shooting Club. Ah yes, now there's another welcoming new activity for newcomers to our village - shooting. I can't imagine the dance being as much fun as the November Firemen's Ball, though.

We can't finish this, leaving you in suspense about the election results. So here they are: unsurprisingly, after 279 of the 392 potential voters exercised their rights, all the councillors in Entre-deux-Eaux have been re-elected without need for a further round of voting next Sunday (though Farmer Duhaut appears to have made a few enemies as he had fewer votes than the others). In Saint Dié, the Communists received insufficient votes (8.08%) to proceed to the next round, the Mayor's party list are currently in the lead with 42.87% of the votes, while the right has 32.5%, but the second round could overturn that lead. Will the Mayor of Saint Dié survive? Watch this space.

A la prochaine!

Below, for those interested in the fine detail of the electoral system, John has produced a short guide, as French local elections are very different from those we have come to accept as the norm. Basically there are separate rules for communes with more than 3,500 electors and those with less than 3,500 (and for Lyon, Marseilles and Paris there are different rules again).

For those villages and small towns of under 3,500, every group/party has the right to produce a list of candidates, and voters can select candidates from one or more of those lists, crossing out those the voter doesn't want - more a case of voting against than voting for. The votes for each candidate are counted separately. Candidates getting an absolute majority and the support of over a quarter of the registered electors are elected. If there are still places to fill a further election is held a week later and the top-scoring candidates are elected.

For communes with 3,500 or more inhabitants a two-ballot list system is used to elect councillors. Voters are given ballot papers with complete lists of candidates representing the different parties and have to vote for a single list; they cannot delete or add names or change the order of candidates on a list. If a list obtains the absolute majority in the first round, it is awarded a number of seats equal to half the seats to be filled. The other seats are distributed between all the lists by a system of the highest averages system of proportional representation. Otherwise a second round of elections is held the following Sunday. Only lists which have obtained 10% of the votes cast may go forward to the second round. The list which obtains the most votes is awarded a number of seats equal to half the seats to be filled. The other seats are distributed among all the lists by the highest averages system (Distribution "by the highest averages" means calculating for each list what would be the average of votes obtained per seat allocated if each one were hypothetically granted an extra seat. The list which obtains the highest average gets a seat. The operation is repeated as many times as there are still seats to be filled. Once the number of seats allocated to each list is known, the next step is to determine which candidates will get them. The general procedure is to follow the order in which they appear on the list).

The mayor is elected by the new council. To be elected mayor, a candidate must have obtained the absolute majority of votes cast in the first or second round. If after two rounds no candidate has obtained this, a third round of elections takes place and the candidate with the most votes is elected.

We were sent a voting card a few days before the election date. On presenting it at the polling station (the scrutineers were all retiring councillors on the list!) we were given a small blue envelope and told to pick up a copy of the list. In the booth there was no pen or pencil! The list is put in envelope and that goes into the ballot box unless you decide to abstain when an empty envelope goes into the box.
