

Yellow-vest olive branch creating deep divisions in Macron's party



Protesters gather at Place de l'Opera during a yellow-vest demonstration on Saturday in Paris. Picture: Getty Images

Adam Sage, The Times, 12:00AM December 18, 2018

President Emmanuel Macron has ignited a debate that threatens to split his centrist party by pledging to review French immigration policy after the yellow-vest revolt.

Divisions within La Republique en Marche have emerged since Mr Macron added immigration to a list of issues to be debated in public meetings across the country as he tries to reshape government policy in response to more than five weeks of protests.

Those on the Left of the party fear immigrants will be blamed for the decline in living standards that was cited by many yellow-vest demonstrators. Those on the Right believe Mr Macron has to tackle the issue directly after protesters claimed that a new UN treaty, designed to improve international co-operation on migration, would result in a massive increase in the number of migrants arriving in France.

Mr Macron has been criticised for failing to think through the consequences of the concessions he made to the yellow-vest movement in a 13-minute

television address that he scripted after discussions with advisers and his wife, Brigitte, last week.

Ministers were kept in the dark about the €14 billion (\$22bn) package of benefit increases and tax cuts for people on low incomes that he announced. Neither did they know that he was going to launch Le Grand Debat National, a three-month series of public meetings in town halls across the country at which voters will be invited to speak.

Mr Macron's concessions seem to have taken some of the heat out of the revolt. The latest demonstrations by yellow-vest protesters — so called because of the high-vis jackets they wear — failed to draw large numbers or to prompt the riots of previous weekends.

Commentators say simmering anger in provincial France could easily boil up again if Mr Macron fails to deliver on promises to improve living standards and the democratic process.

The early signs are that it will be a tough challenge. Mr Macron said subjects on the table during the debates would be the environment, taxation, the public sector, democracy and immigration. "I want the nation to come to an agreement about its profound identity; that we broach the question of immigration," he said in his television address. "We have to confront it."

A record 262,000 immigrants were given visas last year allowing them to stay in France, where the population of 67 million already includes an estimated 5.7 million people born in another country. The 100,755 asylum claims handled by French officials in 2017 was also a record, and looks likely to be surpassed this year.

Researchers say that there are also between 200,000 and 400,000 illegal immigrants in the country.

Mr Macron's critics say his lofty ambition to breathe new life into French democracy risks being overrun by racism and anti-Muslim sentiment, particularly after last week's terrorist attack in Strasbourg, where five people were killed by Cherif Chekatt, an Islamist born in France to north African parents. Dominique Sopo, chairman of SOS Racisme, an anti-racist association, accused Mr Macron of preparing to "throw immigrants to the wolves" in response to yellow-vest anger.

The Times