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1

Britain and France: Some Comments on a Complex Relationship

Sir Christopher Mallaby

Britain and France have long been involved with each other – for 1000 years at least. Passionately, creatively, disastrously, victoriously. The Norman invasion of England in 1066 was the last invasion of Britain. It brought the first real British involvement in Europe. We had, of course, been influenced heavily by the Romans but reverse British influence towards the European mainland really began when the French kings of England, following the Conquest, wished to continue to play a role in France. There were repercussions for centuries. The Hundred Years War can be seen not as an English–French war but more Franco-French, given that the English leaders were Normans.

In any case, it was the start of a long and bitter rivalry. Hume said: ‘From this period we may date the commencement of that great animosity’. A more modern historian, Tout, wrote: ‘the two countries entered the war as kinsfolk and neighbours, and emerged with the tradition of national enmity’. That was part of a wider process of the formation of nations in Europe: Michelet saw the Hundred Years War as the anvil upon which the French nation was forged.

Through the centuries after that, there were many reasons for hostility between Britain and France. Until 1815. The important fact about this date is that it is now almost *two* centuries ago. And the colonial rivalry between Britain and France, which did continue after Waterloo, was staunchly by the Entente Cordiale in 1904.

Since then we have had, so far, almost a century of alliance. In two world wars and the cold war – the three great conflicts of this century – we stood together. There are many reminders of our alliance. Think of those touchingly peaceful British military cemeteries dotted about

northern France. Or I think of the most moving event of my period as ambassador in France. It was the commemoration at Arromanches in June 1994 of the fiftieth anniversary of the Normandy landings. Eleven hundred British veterans marched across the beach where they had landed exactly 50 years before in similar rainy weather, some of them missing a limb or their sight since that landing. One of the mayors at a coastal village said of the forces who landed in 1944: 'Ils ne savaient pas que c'était impossible: alors, ils l'ont fait'.

The legacy of this intimately intermingled history, together with the similarities of the international standing and the population size of Britain and France today, is a sense of rivalry, a readiness to criticize, a reciprocity of *schadenfreude* where the British and the French press leap at opportunities to report the troubles of the other country. Sometimes, when discussing this subject either side of the Channel, one has the feeling that 1815 must have been *after* 1945.

Yet there is also mutual fascination and much admiration, as well as rivalry. To call it a love-hate relationship is too strong on the negative side. 'Best of enemies', the title of a good book on the subject, is not right because there are no hostilities, or even hostility, between the two countries. What we really have is co-operation and rivalry. My favourite expression is 'rival companions'.

Today, there is much similarity between the two countries, but also important differences. There is much co-operation and contact. Our economies are increasingly interdependent, through trade, investment and joint companies. Every day in 1997 goods worth almost 900 million francs crossed the Channel between us. France remains Britain's third export market and the UK is France's second. Britain is the third largest investor in France. British companies are an integral part of the French economy. For instance, Kingfisher in Britain owns Darty and now Castorama. France is also deeply involved in the British economy with investments which are greater than those of Japan. They include services essential to the everyday life of the British people, such as water supplies and buses, as well as more dramatic undertakings such as the involvement of Elf in the North Sea. The volume of trade with France today is 180 per cent higher than ten years ago, and our stock of investment in France is up 200 per cent.

There are similarities in foreign policy. Britain and France are both permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Both are nuclear weapon states. Both want the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to continue. Both have an active, global foreign policy and the political will to send troops abroad to restore or maintain peace. That is

a positive aspect of our colonial history. One positive side-effect of the awful story of Bosnia was the strong growth in defence co-operation between Britain and France, from platoon commanders on the ground to defence ministers. I had innumerable meetings about this with the Balladur and Juppé governments, co-ordinating British and French policy in a very close co-operative effort. Seeing how well we co-operated in this military operation, we consciously took steps to perpetuate that co-operation which continues now to flourish.

But there also differences between us in foreign policy. Take the example of Europe. France after the war, like Germany for different reasons, wanted a new start. Britain was proud of her achievements during the war and did not see a need for a break with the past. Today, Britain has long been a partner in Europe. Britain and France both want a *Europe des Patries*. They both want to be leaders in the European Union. The difference is that France *is* among the leaders, and Britain, though often influential, is not as much of a leader as its present government wants. In addition to our differences over trade policy and over the common agricultural policy, there is the euro. France was the great proponent of the euro and will participate from the start. Britain will not join for several years, so at first Britain will not participate in a whole range of important new interests that will now be shared by the countries of the euro.

Ten million British visitors come to France every year. Four million French people go to Britain. All those British visitors, many of them returning year after year, are the answer to those who think that the criticism of France in the British media represents public opinion. Published opinion and public opinion are not the same. And, even in the field of popular writing, the success of Peter Mayle's books about a British family living in Provence is a demonstration of affection for France. The British agree increasingly with Charles Morgan's principle that France is 'an idea necessary to civilisation'.

Cultural exchanges between Britain and France, and mutual influence in this field, have long been comprehensive and extensive. From Shakespeare to Tintin. We have strong youth and student exchanges.

We should get rid of the stupid stereotypes in each country about the other. The French are surprised to learn that there has been no fog to speak of in London since 1947; and the British would be surprised by the mist that charmingly veils Bordeaux today. The British think that the economy of France is dominated in every aspect by the state. But France is a very successful exporter and has an economy larger than Britain's. The French think that British economic policy is jungle liberalism with

little social provision. But unemployment in Britain is so low *because* enterprise is encouraged, and the social provision for those not in employment is much greater than the French think. On Europe, the British think that France is idealistic but in fact the French approach is really self-interest, a means of magnifying French influence. The French think the British are anti-European but the new Labour government wants Britain to join the euro and to play a more influential role in the leadership of Europe. It has been suggested that the socialisms of Jospin and Blair are completely different and that this could be a bone of contention. But the Jospin government is in fact pragmatic in many of its decisions, notably its privatizations.

Here are some guesses about the future. Britain will join the euro, assuming that it works well for the first several years. Britain will then become more influential in Europe, but Franco-German co-operation will continue. Britain and France will both become more efficient economically, and that will be an example of convergence between them. Pride will disappear on neither side of the Channel, and may remain a stronger feature of the national character on the French side. The key point for me is that rivalry and prejudice will not disappear but co-operation and contact between Britain and France will gradually erode them. The continuing peace and alliance between the two countries will eventually manage to efface the memory of our enmity before 1815.

A great and important question for me, as ambassador, was whether anything can be done to accelerate this process of improvement in our mutual psychology. One idea I had was to found the Entente Cordiale Scholarships. The scheme is now in its third year. It brings about 20 very gifted graduate students from Britain to France and in the other direction each year. As these people advance in life, and influence important decisions, bias and ignorance in Britain towards France and in France towards Britain will be countered by people who really know the other country. That should be a help in the long-term improvement of our relationship.

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