

The Entente: cordiale or glaciale?

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“We always have been, we are, and I hope that we always will be, detested in France.” Thus the old Duke of Wellington at the time of the Napoleonic Wars. “I don’t mean to be rude, but the French people living in the UK are not here for the weather or the food.” Thus a French author living in London. “People in Scotland do not share the English hostility towards the French.” Thus a Scottish blog. “The French are just people like the British; they just live over a tiny piece of water and speak a different language.” Thus a voice from Wales. Different opinions, from different ages. Given all that, is there – was there ever? – an ‘Entente’ and, if so, what will become of it in the 21st century?

First of all, a bit of history. At the time of the celebration of the centenary in 2004 most people thought that the ‘Entente Cordiale’ was a binding together of France and Britain in a solemn commitment to mutual support in the event of war – in particular, of war with Germany. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. For a start, the expression ‘Entente Cordiale’ – ‘friendly understanding’ – was first used as long ago as 1844 in a series of inconsequential discussions between the British and French Governments about their respective imperial ambitions and differences. Then, sixty years later, it was taken up as a catch-all expression for three very specific documents.

By 1904, disputes over African colonies – the French Press had called for mobilisation against Britain at the time of the confrontation at Fashoda on the Nile in 1898 – had become so acute that the two Governments sat down to sort them out. The result, complicated indeed by the fact that France and Britain were supporting different sides in the Russo-Japanese War at the time (France was pro-Russian and Britain pro-Japanese), was no more than a limited agreement between the two Governments. The three documents were duly negotiated and signed: in the first, the British promised to allow the French a wide berth in Morocco while the French promised to allow the British an equally wide berth in Egypt; in the second, there were some complicated arrangements to deal with Newfoundland and West and Central Africa; and in the third there were some even more complicated arrangements to deal with disputes in Siam (now Thailand), Madagascar and the New Hebrides. Given the climate of the time

(and, not least, King Edward VII’s Francophilia – for all sorts of reasons), the agreements were wrapped into the convenient expression of implied good will, and became the ‘Entente Cordiale’. In truth, of course, they were no more than a tidy – and anti-competitive – arrangement between two imperial powers.

So much for the historical facts. Yet the ‘Entente’ has taken on a life of its own. Travellers on the Eurostar can see, in both London and Paris, posters with the flags of the United Kingdom and of France joined in harmony but with the words ‘Entente Cordiale’ superimposed. Even stranger to the historian, perhaps, were the ceremonies of the centenary in 2004, with a state visit to France by the Queen and a return state visit to Britain by President Chirac. Most surprising of all was to see the Band of the Royal Marines, the Household Cavalry and the Grenadier Guards leading the Bastille Day parade in Paris in that year, with the Royal Air Force display team the ‘Red Arrows’ overflying. Something had obviously happened to have turned a rather crude deal between two imperial powers into a sentimental demonstration of supposedly eternal friendship.

What happened is simple to explain. The good will generated in 1904 made it inevitable that the two participants found themselves, almost consequentially, joining together to resist Germany in the First World War. Once the British became fully engaged in the defence of France the wartime propaganda took over. The French were presented to the British as the brave defenders of their homeland and the British were presented to the French as their brave allies from across the Channel who had come to help them. True, there were disputes between the High Commands of the two sides in the middle years of the War – the British not fully understanding the extent of French bravery at Verdun and the French not fully understanding the apparent British desire to charge into German guns at any cost. Nevertheless, the day was won in the end and even the arguments over the Peace Treaty could not obscure the success of two armies in their joint endeavour.

It was in the experience of the First World War that the bond of the ‘Entente’ was truly forged. It was that spirit which prompted Winston Churchill, in the desperate days of June 1940, to welcome the tall, thin, gangling two star French general by the name of Charles de Gaulle, who had come to see him as he sat

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in the garden enjoying the sunshine and who – unlikely as it seemed – claimed to represent undefeated France. As de Gaulle was later to say, “his smile was very warm and friendly”. Long afterwards, the memory of that moment would bring tears to Churchill’s eyes.

None of this, of course, would be of interest, for instance, to the Sun newspaper. The paper, echoing the words of the old Duke of Wellington, would no doubt remind its readers that all that is no more than the stuff of legend, of past history and of no conceivable relevance to today. The French, in the Sun’s view, are apparently always, and irredeemably, ‘Frogs’. Their paper would always, given any opportunity, remind its readers of the perceived humiliations of ‘England’ at the hands of the French – de Gaulle’s veto on ‘us’ joining the Common Market, the embargo on British beef over ‘foot and mouth’, sabotaging our effort in Iraq, defending the indefensible Common Agricultural Policy and so on.

In fact, the Sun has, as so often, captured the lower end of the popular mind. Some 70 per cent of those polled during the centenary celebrations in 2004 thought that the French deserved their negative stereotype – garlic-loving, snail-eating, skirt-chasing, shoulder-shrugging ‘Frogs’. The equivalent figure in France showed that only 20 per cent thought the British deserved their negative stereotype – smelly, fat, badly dressed, drunken, boorish, undersexed, ‘Rosbifs’ – a figure which went up, oddly enough, when ‘English’ was substituted for ‘British’. So the Sun wins.

But not so fast. There is another side of this complicated coin. London is now full of French men and women. It is, we are told, the sixth or seventh largest French city, and South Kensington is now sometimes known as ‘little Paris’. Some 200,000 British – perhaps more – have French homes. Over 12 million British tourists visit France each year. In turn, it is impossible to drive on roads in the Scottish and Welsh summers without seeing any number of French cars – and, vice versa, British cars on French roads. In sport, one of the most successful managers of the English Premiership in football is French. Harry Potter is a best seller in France while Sylvie Guillem is a radiant star in London ballet. Exhibitions of French Impressionists sell out in London while the Arctic Monkeys are revered in Paris. Best selling books are written in English about life in Provence or the Dordogne, or in French about the unexpected joys of English cooking

And then, of course, there is the Internet. As the chat rooms reverberate with exchanges in cyberspace and the search engines pour out information irrespective of national identities, it is impossible to ignore the mood of 2008. If London or Edinburgh or Cardiff have the buzz for the young French, the countryside of France – la France profonde – has the buzz for the middle aged

British. Gradually, perhaps, there will even come an acceptance, both in Britain and in France, that the two communities can stand together rather than living, as they tend to at the moment, in segregation. British residents in France are already standing for election to local political office. Soon the same will be true of French residents in Britain.

In sum, there is, of course, no doubt that at times the ‘Entente’ has seemed to be ‘glaciale’ rather than ‘cordiale’. The personal relations between Jacques Chirac and Tony Blair were openly bad. The continued opposition in France to what is perceived as ‘Anglo-Saxon’ is resented in England (note the ‘Anglo’ in the expression) just as the smugness of the British over their recent economic performance is resented in France. Yet the weeks, months and years roll on. President Sarkozy has struck a new note. The ‘Entente’ will more and more be seen as a binding cultural movement – a reaching across the “tiny piece of water” of the Welsh voice. In time, all of us in Britain, in spite of the urgings of the Sun, may come to see the truth of a remark by an expert in popular French culture. “The French are a kind of sibling, cast in the same mould as us, but showing how the same genes can express themselves in alternative ways.” The politics will then follow the culture. Now that really will be the day – when the ‘Entente’ ceases to be intermittently ‘glaciale’ and becomes permanently and gloriously ‘cordiale’.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill and French Commander General de Gaulle salute at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Paris during the Armistice celebrations held in November 1944

