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FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

DIPLOMATIC REPORT No. 91/82

WRF 014/2

General Distribution

FRANCE  
15 February, 1982

VALEDICTORY DESPATCH

*Her Majesty's Ambassador at Paris to the  
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs*

SUMMARY

The Ambassador writes his valedictory despatch after three years in France and 36 years in the Diplomatic Service (paragraph 1).

2. In contrast to other foreign countries, France is one about which most British people have fixed ideas, based more on emotional beliefs than objective analysis. It is difficult for an Ambassador in Paris to convey a message which does not conform to his audience's image of France (paragraph 2).

3. But careful analysis is needed. In party political terms France is a fragmented country, characterised in this century by authoritarian governments or unstable Parliamentary régimes. It is not possible to be sure that the institutions of the Fifth Republic will provide long-term stability. French Governments rely on the contrived pursuit of a glorified "national interest" to unite and rally the country. They are not reined in by constraints of Parliamentary opinion or fair play (paragraphs 3-5).

4. The new leaders believe that, with their coming to power, they will bring in a new and better form of government. But the changes they are introducing may bring problems and eat away the strong economic base on which France's current strength is based. M. Mitterrand's achievement in bringing the Communist Party to heel may not have put an end to the dangers of factionalism (paragraphs 6-8).

5. The factors which lead French Governments to encourage the development of a strong national sentiment in turn oblige them to pursue a fiercely nationalistic foreign policy. In the long term, selfishness may be bad for France (paragraph 9).

6. The French approach to foreign policy tends to excite the traditional rivalry between France and Britain. Although the French have great affection and respect for Britain, this has been tempered in recent years by Community problems and the UK's economic decline. An end to both would set relations on a better path, but in dealing with France it is nearly always necessary to combine warm words with a combative attitude (paragraph 10).

7. The implications for the Paris Embassy: a need to pay attention to good appearances and to maintain a strongly centralised organisation, resisting some of the trends brought about by the

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development of modern communications and multilateral diplomacy. The staffing of the Embassy needs to be kept at high quality (paragraphs 11 and 12).

8. The Ambassador briefly reviews his experience in the Diplomatic Service (paragraph 13).

(Confidential)  
My Lord,

Paris,  
15 February, 1982.

After writing about France for three years and after filling thousands of pages with ephemeral thoughts for 36 years in the Diplomatic Service, all this output being swallowed up by the 30-year rule so that the only continuity is in the slender threads of one's own memory, I am not much tempted by the anticlimax of a valedictory despatch. If I have failed to communicate anything essential about Franco-British relations in my years in France, it is too late to try to remedy matters now. On the other hand it would be ungrateful not to write a few final chords to try to round off the score.

2. One of the principal difficulties facing a British Ambassador at Paris is credibility. France is the country which most British people reckon to know reasonably well. Many of them do know it well at some level or other. In most foreign countries an Embassy has a near monopoly of detailed knowledge, with only a few journalists, businessmen and accredited "specialists" as rivals. In those circumstances an Embassy's assessment starts with the advantage of telling an unfamiliar story. In France this is never the case. And matters are made more difficult by the fact that, for many of Britain's opinion formers, France is as much a cult-object to be collected, admired and enjoyed as a foreign country to be coolly dissected and analysed. It is not easy to convey the unwelcome news that France is not what people in Britain tend to think it is—neither incorrigibly capricious and untrustworthy on the one hand, nor a beacon of intelligence, long-sightedness and purposefulness on the other. Sitting in Paris I have been surprised both by the indignation felt in London about every new example of France's fickleness and also by the persistence of belief there that the right approach to France is to woo her in the bluff and honest style of King Henry V with Princess Katherine, although the methods used to win that other Katherine in the *Taming of the Shrew* would in fact be more pertinent. These emotional attitudes do not seem to me to meet the requirements of a relationship with France. But it is not easy to explain this to the convinced Francophiles and Francophobes who are to be found in many corners of Whitehall, Westminster and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

3. The burden of my argument since I have been here is that thought about France has to start with a careful analysis of her internal situation. France is a factional and deeply politicised country, with strongly rooted political divisions leading occasionally to sharp constitutional change. The French are too highly educated, too rich and too cultivated to be content with anything other than democracy; but they have failed to establish stable institutional forms through which to enjoy it. An Englishman cannot fail to reflect in Paris on the superior advantage of the British Parliamentary monarchy (or the US division of powers) in providing a stable constitutional system within which governments can change and cope with change without any need to envisage, either aggressively or defensively, coup or counter-coup or revolution. In France the system of government is at

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present authoritarian, although not tyrannical. The alternative has been, and is still generally considered to be, a fragmented Parliamentary régime in which governments have no durability or real authority. The interest of M. Mitterrand's Presidency is that he is deploying the same authoritarian methods as his Fifth Republic predecessors, while trying to evoke memories of the more Parliamentary Third and Fourth Republics. It is doubtful whether this conjuring trick can last for very long. It is hardly possible to believe that the Fifth Republic has endowed France at last with stable institutions. One day, perhaps in 1986, there will be a National Assembly opposed to the President. When that happens the capacity of the Fifth Republic to survive will be severely tested.

4. The effect of the present authoritarian system in France is best understood by recalling a saying of Cavour's of which Sir Nicholas Henderson recently reminded me: "If we had done for ourselves the things which we are doing for Italy, we should be great rascals." The charming Frenchmen trained by the Grandes Ecoles, who ably staff France's administration whatever the Government in power, indulge in surprisingly rascally behaviour in pursuit of Governmental or state interests. They do what they are told and cannot do otherwise if they wish to pursue interesting and comfortable careers in the public service. They are in no danger of running foul of Parliament or Press as long as they work faithfully for the Government under the general heading of service to France.

5. The glorification of France serves to give the whole system its *raison d'être*. Britain has an intelligible policy—The Queen in Parliament administering and making the law. France has nothing comparable. It is the idea of France which is invoked to give a reasonable degree of unity to otherwise ungainly political contrivances. This is cleverly done and comes near to giving France a good degree of stability and an enviable national *élan*. But, underneath, the political divisions remain, and any President or Prime Minister of France has to spend an inordinate amount of time on what is called "politique politicienne", that is to say keeping the precarious internal balance under control.

6. French history in the present century is more easily intelligible against this background—the weaknesses of the Parliamentary régimes in the Third and Fourth Republics, the vanity of the Vichy régime, and the brittleness of the Fifth Republican régimes, whether General de Gaulle's or President Giscard's. There are interesting implications to be drawn for President Mitterrand and his Government. The Socialist Party professes to be capable of breaking out of the circle of brittleness or weaknesses. Its leaders seem convinced that they hold the secret of change for the better. M. Bérégovoy, the Secretary-General of the Elysée, told me recently that I was fortunate to have seen the beginnings of the socialist experience in France. I replied that as an Englishman I had had the experience of socialism since 1945. Ah, he said, but this time it's the real thing. Such a naïveté at so high a level is hardly likely to be good for France. It does not seem to be the attitude required for operating successfully either the authoritarian or the Parliamentary modes, both of which require calculation rather than faith. It is ominous that M. Mitterrand and his colleagues are taking the great risk of tempering with the centralised administration which Louis XIV and Napoleon bequeathed to France and which has by and large served as a substitute for a good constitution. There may be a danger of the socialist government breaking too far out of the closed circles of France's traditional politics and calling up unwanted bogies of regionalism and accentuated sectarianism.

7. Much of the foregoing may be thought unduly sombre about a country which is visibly richer and more prosperous than Britain. Many of the French-

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men who have built up France's prosperity fear that she has now entered on a spiral of decline. They probably exaggerate the gradient of the spiral, but it is not easy to believe that they are wrong. It is possible that France will in the mid-'80s find herself lacking the economic margin which has helped her to cope relatively easily in recent years with the obstinate frictions of her internal politics. Even the admirable dexterity with words which is so much part of the French genius may then be hard put to it to make France seem the model for lesser nations which she claims so often to be.

8. By bringing in a strong and wide majority, the Mitterrand experiment has for the time being blurred the edges of France's factionalism. M. Mitterrand has to his credit the great achievement of reducing and neutralising the powerful French Communist Party (PCF). It is not easy to judge as yet whether this will be a lasting change. If it were to be so, the possibility of continuing peaceful "alternance" across the Centre ought to be within France's reach. Unfortunately for France, the Socialist Party is itself a coalition of factions. There is no certainty that its rapid rise since M. Mitterrand reshaped it in 1971 will last; and the old fragmentation which is now so much in evidence on the Right may reappear on the Left before long. Even if the PCF remains relatively weak, France may still remain sufficiently unstable politically for its governments to have to continue to be over-preoccupied with the business of outplaying the rival factions which vie with one another to represent the French nation.

9. All of these considerations regarding France's political nature have a bearing on France's international conduct. They make France a difficult and wayward partner. When French Presidents, Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers appear to be addressing themselves to international problems, they tend in reality, more than those of other countries, to be thinking of domestic effects. The "independence" theme of successive French Governments tends to be regarded abroad as a tiresome piece of "Frenchness" out of which the French will grow in time if they are sufficiently humoured. In fact it is a political necessity for France, the drug, so to speak, which keeps a schizophrenic political condition under control. National sentiment and self-righteousness are deliberately fostered in a way which is normally encountered only in less developed or more ideologically directed countries. As indicated in paragraph 4 above, men and women who are highly cultivated, rational beings in every other respect tend to be turned by the authoritarian system into hard and blinkered pursuers of a narrowly focused and not always wisely calculated national interest when it is a question of France's foreign policy. Those who deal with French representatives in NATO, in the Community or in other international organisations will know from their direct, day-to-day experience what this means in practice. In a sense, France seems not to have moved into the 20th century. She dislikes the multilateral way of conducting business, abhors the idea of subordination to a superpower and does not feel unduly constrained by loyalty to partners or to the given word. The centralised authority which has helped to make France one of the most prosperous and powerful of the ordinary, as distinct from super, powers of the world deploys French strength in a remarkably selfish way in external relations. It has to be admitted, ruefully, that this appears to have done France more good than harm in the disordered post-war world. But history is long and there may eventually be a price to pay, just as there was a price to pay in 1940 for the fragmented politics of the third republic.

10. The implications of French official attitudes for Britain are not easy. Britain is a natural historical rival of France and it seems to suit French Governments to keep the feeling of rivalry with Britain alive. There is a deep respect

and affection for Britain in France. There is also envy of Britain's happier history and its benefits. Liberal opinion in France has always been tempted to regard Britain as a model, although Britain's economic decline has much weakened this tendency in recent years. But the national consciousness which French Governments foster responds in its liveliest way to the stimulus offered by neighbouring Britain. Germany is less loved and more feared and does not appear to give the French people the same sense of comprehensive challenge as Britain does. The way to a close and loyal understanding with France is therefore uphill. If current Community problems are solved this year, the way may start to run downhill, but it will still be rocky and hazardous. In the end French Governments will accept partnership with Britain and make it work fruitfully in proportion to Britain's strength. The revival of Britain's economy will make it possible to deal more equally with France. Cool, hard, unsentimental bargaining, with many warm words clothing calculated and often combative gestures, would be the right way to deal with France.

11. Against this background it is possible to make one or two comments on the work of this Embassy in France. The appearance and grandeur of the Embassy are very important. I have seen recently that the total cost of running this Embassy is over £5 million annually. Most of this money is spent on pay, allowances and accommodation. It is tending to be spread on a proliferation of staff and a flattening of differentials which may be in harmony with the spirit of the times but are not in harmony with the spirit of France. Immediate, high volume communications and the growth of multilateral diplomacy (the Community, NATO, the UN, etc.) are slowly turning the Embassy into a microcosm of Whitehall. This process seems inevitable, but it is very important that the old bilateral aspect of British relations with France should not be neglected. In France more than in most other countries in which I have served the Embassy needs to be somewhat monarchical in style, keeping due state in the house which Wellington bought and with the various branches of the Embassy tightly co-ordinated round a strong centre. I am glad to say that the recent Inspection has not weakened this aspect of the Embassy's character. I am grateful to the members of my staff for accepting a more centralised system than is common in the Diplomatic Service these days. My advice to my successor would be to continue it if he wishes to have an Embassy capable of standing up to the calculated abrasions of French diplomatic method. It is also important that the Embassy staff should not fall into the habit of thinking that their first duty is to please every head of department in London who cares to telephone. Deliberation is very necessary in dealing with Paris. The steady growth in the quantity of business transacted between Governments makes co-ordination in the Embassy a necessary extra safeguard additional to co-ordination in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Whitehall.

12. It will be a very good thing if my successor can stay for at least four or five years. The tight French system is not easy to penetrate and it takes two years to do it. It would be a good thing if the younger members of the diplomatic staff had more time to read and travel and if, when they had more time, they used it for reading and travelling. The severe cuts imposed in the recent Inspection on personal expenditure point in the opposite direction. An Embassy such as this one in Paris needs to be staffed carefully with regard to qualities of intellect and imagination, and considerations connected with the career structure of the Service and administrative convenience should not be allowed to get the upper hand. The French Administration is of the highest quality in human terms. France is an exigent country and Paris a most exigent capital.

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13. It has been an honour to serve in an exacting post where there is an unusually wide gap between appearance and reality and where as a result the keeping up of appearances or even the creation of them is often more important than the search for truth or the communication of it. I have enjoyed my career in the Diplomatic Service. I have been lucky to reach the top, as I was never a private secretary nor a head nor an assistant head of a department. I have opened a post (Ulan Bator) and closed a post (the Office of the Political Adviser to the CinC Far East at Singapore). I have served in the largest and smallest of posts. I have spent only 10 years at home and 26 abroad. I have been lucky to have had long and close connections with the British armed services overseas, in Austria during the occupation, in Singapore and in Germany, an experience which is invaluable for checking flights of diplomatic fancy. I am indebted to my wife, to all with whom I have served, and to all the Ministers of successive governments with whom I have had to do. Finally I have enjoyed the experience of France and the relationship of "tendresse assortie d'agacements"—"tendresse" with the people and "agacements" with the Government—which makes up the on-going Anglo-French love affair. If the French have a word for it, it is unlikely to be "marriage".

I am Sir

Yours faithfully

REGINALD HIBBERT.

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