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FRENCH PRESS TREATMENT OF THE UK ECONOMY

SUMMARY

1. The French press has radically reappraised its view of the British economy. It is now presenting a more positive assessment than for many years.

DETAIL

2. For as long as any of us here can remember, the accepted wisdom in France has been that the UK, above all its economy, is in decline. Suddenly, in recent weeks, one publication after another has changed its appreciation. Three factors have contributed to this: the newly positive view taken by international investors and analysts, the approach of the general election, and this Embassy's persistent efforts to challenge misrepresentation by the French press.

3. The most considered and authoritative expression of this new trend of press comment appeared early last month in the quality economic and business periodical L'Expansion. This magazine is read by top management and tends to give the lead to other, more widely-read papers. The magazine's thesis on the UK was, briefly, that, after a period when an over-valued pound inflicted grave damage on Britain's industrial fabric, and despite a growing gap between north and south, the main lines of the economy were pointing in the right direction, and above all, the British had developed a new spirit of enterprise. The article was written by François de Witt after a COI-programmed visit to the UK.

4. These are the main elements in all comment currently emerging from France, but the stress is placed more on the new dynamism or on social inequalities, according to the political sympathies of the publications.

5. The most unreserved convert and leader of the new trend is Sir James Goldsmith's news weekly, L'Express, which is read widely by the middle classes. Sir J Goldsmith, who takes a close interest in the editorial line pursued by his publication, belonged - at least until recently - to the «decline» school. Last weekend L'Express published an editorial extolling Britain's «rediscovered pride». It followed much the same analysis as the L'Expansion article just mentioned, referring to «monetarist horse-medicine», but listed the positive results of recent years. In this type of

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coverage the state of Britain is seen as closely associated with the person of the Prime Minister. The author entitled the editorial «Lady Courage».

6. This editorial was preceded a few weeks ago by a full page up-beat assessment of the UK economy in the same magazine which followed closely the lines of a budget-day briefing given to the author (and other economic journalists) by my staff. Also this past weekend, the more markedly right-wing glossy weekly, Le Figaro Magazine, published a dithyrambic piece proclaimed «England is winning» and concluded that the success of the Prime Minister's policies «is a lesson for those who, in France, are tempted by the sirens of the centre». The author of the piece, Alain Griotteray, was recently on a visit to the UK organized by the Embassy and the COI.

7. It is also notable that in the less sharply right-wing news weekly Le Point, the economic editor, Guihannec, who hitherto had taken the line that despite great efforts by the Prime Minister the UK was still a country in decline, wrote last week, in a series of features of a generally positive tenor, that «something has changed» and that «the very idea of decline has disappeared». (We have been conducting a vigorous correspondence with his editor-in-chief in recent weeks, to challenge an earlier reference by Guihannec to the UK's economic performance as «the worst in Europe».)

8. A similar trend is apparent in the left-of-centre press. The editor-in-chief of Nouvel Economiste wrote, a few days after we briefed him, a handsome tribute to Britain's economic success, and to Mrs Thatcher's achievement in combining a gradual opening to Europe with traditional nationalism.

9. Commentators in left-of-centre papers do not praise the assertion of free market principles or the decline of trade-union power. Nonetheless, the analysis of UK economic history since 1979 is much the same as L'Expansion's. Their treatment still tends to stress the drop in the economy at the beginning of the eighties, the level of unemployment, or the north-south gap. But now they put the good news first and the negative aspects second, in a «but on the other hand» paragraph.

10. In a country which lacks a national press, and where the regional dailies' coverage of international affairs is thin, the news weeklies, who have run most of the pieces quoted here, are particularly influential. They have circulations of between 300,000 and 500,000, and play the role of Time and Newsweek in the US.

11. The staff of Le Monde, with whom we have also intensified our efforts recently, is lagging behind the weeklies, which is not surprising given its left-of-centre sympathies and its habitual slowness to recognize new trends. But prompted perhaps by my letter to André Fontaine challenging a sweeping reference to Britain's de-industrialisation they have now sought our help in planning an investigation of this issue in the UK.

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12. Le Figaro, on the right but historically distrustful of Britain, last week made its own contribution to the revision of the way the French view us with a two-page spread on the economy. Like Le Monde, it sells about half a million copies daily.

CONCLUSION

13. This radical reappraisal of the UK economy is part of a wider re-assessment, which includes Britain's East-West role, especially after the Prime Minister's visit to Moscow, and acknowledgement that Britain is now a fully «European» member of the Community. It is striking that the articles referred to above come from almost the whole spectrum of the French press, with the sole exception of the Communist L'Humanité, and that radio and television comment is following the lead of the written press.

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