

Macron in France is Going Fishing



A historically interesting letter, curiously undated but written in early June 1940, is being auctioned in November 2021. It was a reply by Winston Churchill, who had become British Prime Minister on May 10, 1940, to a message from French Prime Minister Paul Reynaud who pleaded for more British air support as the Nazi forces were close to and about to capture Paris. An earlier plea on May 10, 1940, by France for more British planes, 10 squadrons, was made and was agreed to by Britain, Churchill faced a difficult problem. Paris was to fall to the Nazis on June 14. The Allied evacuation from Dunkirk was taking place, May 27-June 4, the largest military evacuation in history. Churchill refused Reynaud's request saying the Squadrons were desperately needed to protect the military personnel and the little ships that carried them, and to fight the Luftwaffe in the impending Battle of Britain. The RAF had already provided more than 20 squadrons of planes to France. Churchill refused to supply any more, saying it

would be “short sighted to squander our fighter squadrons,” which he wrote constituted the sole defense against the attack Britain must expect.

France today is not pleading for British fighter planes, but it is seeking armies of fish. French President Emmanuel Macron is embroiled in a dispute with Britain over French fishing boats and permits. The dispute is related to the Brexit arrangement between the UK and the EU by which EU nations need permits to fish in UK waters. Several permits have been given to French fishing boats, but the French want more. Macron has insisted on continuing the fight to get licenses in British territorial waters, 6-12 nautical miles off the UK shores and in the sea off the Jersey coast. The issue is more complicated because Jersey has granted only temporary licenses while the negotiations continue, but France insists they must be permanent, “We did not get what we wanted. They are playing with our nerves.” Macron has been adamant, “we are going to continue to fight. We will not abandon our fishermen.”

French fishermen, not satisfied by Macron, are unhappy at the announcement by French maritime minister Annick Girardin that the government was preparing a rescue plan of more than 60 million euros, in essence a financial compensation package, for owners of boats to remain in port. On the other hand, Jersey insists that French fishermen were already making catches of fish in its waters.

The cross-channel dispute continues. On November 3, 2021, a French court freed a British trawler impounded in the quarrel between the two countries over fishing rights. It overturned an earlier demand that the British captain pay a 150,000 euro bond, since the trawler had been caught fishing for scallops in French territorial waters without a proper license.

Paris says UK was denying fishing licenses to which they were entitled. France threatened to ban UK fishing boats from unloading in French ports.

Macron claims to be acting for Europe, not simply for France. When he emerged politically Macron proposed great plans for Europe, for both instrumental and personal reasons. In his campaign in 2017 he called for a strong France in a strong Europe. He favored a deeper monetary union, more military capacity, called for Europe to increase its defenses, technological independence. In 2020 he persuaded Germany to agree to a 750-billion-euro plan to aid other members of the EU. It seemed as if Macron was eager to succeed Angela Merkel as the virtual leader of the EU. He took a hard line with Britain in the Brexit negotiations.

But Macron is less willing to be involved in the character of the EU now that the Polish Constitutional Court has rejected the Court of Justice of the European Union as the dominant judicial body. In this debate between Brussels and Warsaw, the question for Macron is whether to stress the primacy of the French constitution and laws over legislation of the EU. It raises again the issue that was present in 2005 when a referendum in France rejected a proposed European constitution.

Macron has internal problems, with lockdowns, COVID-19 difficulties, increasing gas and oil prices, but also external ones with the U.S. and the UK. He remains unhappy about the American-British-Australian consortium that was responsible for the AUKUS contract, to help Australia build nuclear submarines, which meant Australia rejected the 56 billion euro French submarine contract that Macron had proposed.

Behind the hurt are economic and political reasons. The rejection of the French contract comes at a time when the French national debt is more than 130% of GDP. Perhaps even more significant is the hurt to pride. Macron said he was blindsided by the arrangement and was given no prior notice of it. He recalled the French ambassador from Washington.

President Joe Biden did not apologize but termed the event clumsy and not done with a lot of grace.

For Macron, the ambitious world statesman, the would-be iconic leader of European liberals, and with overtones of delusions of grandeur, the AUKUS deal also seemed to ignore France's claim to be a player in the Indo-Pacific area in which it possesses several French departments, and in which it can be a partner in an alliance to contain China.

A second dispute with UK, other than fish, concerns the arrival of migrants into Britain. About 15,400 migrants attempted to cross the English Channel in small boats in the first eight months of 2021, of whom 3,500 had been picked up because of difficulties at sea and brought back to France. Prime Minister Boris Johnson said, "we continue to work extremely closely with the French to prevent these crossings... we need to do more."

All these issues are relevant to Macron's re-campaign for president in the elections in April 2020, and his claim that he needs more time to complete the transformation of France. His thrust is that he can drive the country forward while his opponents sow division and doubt. He argues that the two candidates from the far right, Marine Le Pen, head of the National Rally, and Eric Zemmour, TV pundit, focus on immigration and crime while he is a centrist concentrating on unifying a divided nation. The message of Macron is that his detractors fall "into the sickness of the century, which is demagoguery...we wallow in talk of division. We have to work collectively to build pragmatic solutions."

Though Macron is currently ahead in the public opinion polls, he has the misfortune of having to campaign at a time when right wing nationalism that has been increasing in the country. There are at least two disturbing factors. One is the spread in France, and also now in the U.S. of "replacement theory," the contention that white people are being replaced by immigrants as a way to change the culture of the country. The concept was introduced by the French writer Renaud Camus in 2010, warning of "genocide by

substitution" because of Muslim immigration from Africa. Public opinion polls indicate that "replacement theory" has gained some approval.

The second disturbing factor is the rehabilitation of former well known antisemitic writers, especially Charles Maurras of Action Francaise, founded to "defend the real country," and Maurice Barres, focused on blood and soil, who in 1900 warned of a new population, presumably Jews, "that will take over and ruin our homeland."

With this undercurrent of antisemitism and extreme prejudice, it is regrettable there is no French major public intellectual who is popular and can challenge the immoderate voices and groups. There is no living Emile Zola, nor is there a new Marquis de Lafayette prepared to return from Yorktown to France.