The British Invasion: Whatever Next for the French?

With the mainlands of Britain and France separated by just twenty-odd miles of water at the narrowest point of the English Channel, it is easy to understand that making a crossing to the land opposite has historically always been the object of fascination and need of discovery of both peoples. Along with such voyages inevitably comes either "conquest immigration" or conquest of another kind, that of interbreeding and "consequential immigration". Even dating it back to just 1066 gives Anglo-French migration a span of virtually one thousand years. Since that time, when William the Conqueror invaded and took control in England, the British have had their turn at rule, with regions of France like Brittany and Normandy run by English barons and considered to be part of England. The British even laid claim to the French crown through royal inter-marriage at one time, although this strenuously rebutted by the French.

The two countries have enjoyed a very up and down relationship over the ages, much-like most geographical neighbours. They have fought against each other yet come to each other’s aid in times of troubles. Both built vast empires and perhaps it was exactly the competition between them that contributed to their separate successes in this field. And success there still is. Long after the demise of the era of empire, Britain remains the fourth largest economy in the world, the French not far behind. Yet despite the inevitable interlinking, differences have always remained enormous. Royalty against republic, the basis of law-making (British by precedent, the French by constitution) are just two elements that contribute to a cultural divide which has been at the core of feelings of love and hate, distrust and frustration, and blame and counter-blame for the ills of the world. Yet somehow there has remained a fascination and at least a grudging respect from both sides, accompanied by some good-hearted humour, which could both soothe and gently provoke simultaneously. The two rival powers have often been likened to an old married couple: always arguing, but unable to do without each other.

One cultural difference relevant to the discussion here is that whereas the French quite rightly have a loyalty to their homeland and to date have seen little elsewhere to envy in terms of where to live, the British have seemed more adventurous in their outlook and quite comfortable in searching out and adopting permanent new homes for
themselves wherever felt beneficial. In 2003, for example, figures indicated that no less than 20% of Britons were living outside the UK. The French have always considered France has everything a country can offer: the mountains of the Alps and Pyrenees, the ancient volcanoes of the Auvergne, the wild coastline and seas of Brittany, the sunshine and milder climate of the Mediterranean coast, the rich farmland of Beauce and Normandy for foodstuffs, and Burgundy and Bordelais for wine. The British though, not without a country of beauty and facilities themselves, perhaps view things a little differently. That may be a result of their island status and the desire to connect to the peoples of the greater land base of Western Europe, or maybe their more northerly position and desire to connect to the rays of a hotter sun. Whatever the diverse truth, for the British, there has always been much movement in general and long been a special dream about living in France in particular. Good food, culture, space (France has the same population as Britain at approximately 60 million, but is double its size) with a laid-back lifestyle are usually cited as the major ingredients.

Perhaps it was at the start of the 20th century that patterns of migration started to impact a little more significantly. Travel across the Channel and on from there became increasingly easy, fast and comfortable. With more reliable boats, trains and cars there was a chance for tourism to become an everyday word and thought. Naturally it was the upper class that dominated such movements initially. Edward VIII was a regular visitor and virtually emigrated to France following his abdication.

The two World Wars, of course, interrupted things. Curiously they brought more British to France, although unfortunately to fight and often die. Yet, after 1945 the trend re-established itself. British middle-classes purchased second homes either in the sun, or in the mountains for skiing. The latter is one element somewhat missing in the UK and limited even in Scotland, its weather inconsistent and snowfall irregular and too often turning very icy.

And thus, until recently, we could have pointed to the stereotype Briton in France: middle-class, over fifty, retired or semi-retired, enjoying the French reputation for a certain style of living. For him or her there was a sense of romance, art, and pleasant focus on quality food and drink. The simple life, with less stress and pace, combined with a cleaner, more natural and spacious environment beautifully suited the requirements of their time of life. Even criminality was considered to be less, although whether true or just in the mind remains an open question.
But within two generations, the numbers of those able to live the dream have appeared to explode. Over 500,000 French houses are British owned, involving 1,500,000 people, with British purchases in 2003 numbered at 35,000. What has so suddenly changed things? We examine three factors.

**European Union**

Despite widespread reservations, the EU seems a growing fact of life that most now accept in overall terms if not in constitution and detail. When the scales of commercial competition are considered, it has to make sense to try to trade on a European basis when faced with the sheer size of the population blocks of emerging economies such as China and India, let alone the financial clout of the USA. The standardizations brought into force by the emergence of the EU as not only a trading union but a growing political federation have certainly contributed in no small part to making life easier for the would-be migrant Briton. Customs and passport control have been relaxed to a greater extent allowing freer people movement and re-settlement. Availability of currency and credit abroad has been made less complex. In commerce, procedures for the take-overs of foreign companies have been simplified allowing a greater centralisation and therefore Europe-wide marketing. The harmonization of companies and brand-names brings ready and broader public recognition. For example, Jif cleaner has become Cif, likes its European counter-part. On the streets and motorways, in shops and public places, road signs and indicators of all kinds have been synchronised. For the British in France, the finding of "autoroutes", facilities and everyday grocery items has become recognisably simpler. But perhaps a more major boost has been in EU financial inter-linking, in particular the ability to draw pension without inhabiting the homeland. This release has expanded the socio-economic grouping of pensioners financially able to emigrate to France, the numbers of which had already been considerably bolstered by an increased longevity of life enjoyed by the ageing population. Not only this, but at retirement age British citizens are now able to tap into the French health service for free, a huge reassurance for people who may suffer the maladies associated with their time of life.
Travel and the Budget Airline

If much of the latter applies itself mostly to the gentile retirees (these being part of what is now sometimes referred to as the "golden immigration") then it has been the changes in the modes of travel that have suddenly more attracted a younger generation. This group had begun by being able to drive and ride across to France more easily. The advent of the Channel Tunnel increased accessibility by car and rail. Long-serving ferry services remained competitive reducing prices and extending concepts such as that of cheap day-trips which allowed visitors not only to savour French lifestyle but also to stock up on drink and foodstuffs either unique to France or simply cheaper there than in UK.

Once in France, moving around was not so difficult. Alongside a fast and efficient railway system, there was a fine motorway network at the disposal of the motorist to accompany the reliability and size of the modern car. Continental driving was being made quick and safe, a big consideration when one has kith and kin on board. Holidays along France’s vast coastlines therefore have long been enjoyed by many a car-driving British family either through the towing or renting of a caravan, the erecting of a tent on well-facilitated campsites, the booking into of the famous French "gîte" system or simply the finding of suitable hotels and "chambres d’hôtes".

But suddenly there has come a new innovation, the budget airline. Companies, the likes of EasyJet and Ryanair, have recognised the need for cheap connections to France amongst other destinations, and have set about securing deals with the smaller underused regional airports that happen to coincide with some of the Britons' favourite hideaways (like Bergerac, Carcassonne and Limoges). Now it is realistic for not just the retired, but the working Briton also, to have a house in a far away place. To visit for a Bank Holiday weekend or any weekend at all is as attractive in mind and time as it is in price.

The House Market

Once connected to France many Britons were finding it increasingly difficult to motivate themselves to return to England. They were usually forced to for financial or career reasons. But there has been another breakthrough. People’s thinking about their lifestyle has been changed in a concept known as ‘downsizing’. Properties in the large conurbations of Britain had been rising in value at a far greater rate than their countryside counterparts. This was because in rural areas better
paid jobs traditionally had been difficult to find, and facilities like banks, post-offices and hospitals had been being removed and "centralised" towards the larger towns and cities, reducing further the lure of the country. But a new generation saw a chance in this for a better life, and began taking it. They opted for an easier, stress-free, cleaner life in the country by selling urban houses at high values and buying country houses at lower ones. They used the price differential to get rid of debt and if necessary subsidise a less well-paid job. There was still reasonable enough disposable income left, if not necessarily quite as much as before. The payback was in the priority one area of quality of life. Some loss of facilities could be covered by ownership of more cars per family, others by new internet technology (such as for banking and even some shopping). For many there was not even the sacrifice of loss of job prospects, since that same internet technology was allowing them just as easily to do an office job on a computer in a country cottage as in a London office.

And now it has not taken some of them long to make the next quantum leap. The internet can be surfed just as easily from Limoges as London, and prices of country cottages in France have been a little as 20-25% of the price of the English equivalent (particularly after the spectacular UK price rise of 90% in 8 years to 2004). The new younger breed are cashing-in not on UK urban/rural house price differentials, but on UK variables with France, and looking to not just inhabit France but earn a living either from there or in there too. Until recently, finding work in France itself has been somewhat tricky, the French protectively keeping their employment market fairly tightly closed to outsiders. But with the benefit of EU deregulation and internet technology, employment prospects have considerably improved. And whilst it is also true that the condition of French cottages have often been of lower standard than the British equivalent, the British enjoy a tradition of renovating old properties and restoring them to former glories. With French property at such a discount, money for such restoration does not pose a problem.

As a consequence, the property industry in both countries is in full flow. French agents have established solid links with their British counterparts. These UK connections together with their internet site and webcam viewing capabilities make property purchase much simpler. It reduces time-wasting trips and negates the need to be able to comprehend the French language and French property purchasing procedure variations. In France, agents in the most popular areas often display a Union Jack sticker in their windows signalling an English speaking member of staff. UK television channels are exploring and
explaining the length and breadth of France. It is those same channels incidentally, via the advent of satellite TV, which provide "home comforts" for those who are sufficiently encouraged to make the big move. Numerous specialist publications such as French Property News have sprung up to give help to, and above all to sell to, the would-be emigrants. French property exhibitions are held in abundance in all regions of Britain.
The British dream of owning a stylish old detached house and some land in the beauty of the French countryside is alive, well and thriving for those of any age and from virtually any socio-economic grouping.

**Brief Examples from Trends**

So it seems that a combination of the three factors (a certain harmonization within the EU, new travel opportunities, and the housing market tied to the introduction of internet and other new technology) has thrust wide open the gates of France. By way of these, a full range of Britons is now emigrating to all parts of France. The affluent middle-classed pensioner (who has seen numbers of his own socio-economic class grow) has been joined not only by his socio-economic lesser and the downsizer, but also by other sub-groups. There are, for example, very early retirees not needing work because of the house price differentials, and a younger internet generation not downsizing, but upgrading their housing and lifestyle. They are not necessarily decreasing debt but reinvesting in bigger and better facilitated homes and other lifestyle facility choices. Another section of younger immigrants, some following their parents, are succeeding in finding gaps in the workplace servicing their fellow Britons. They represent a part of the change towards immigrants who come to France to achieve something beyond just living there. They want to directly apply their enterprise into business and earning in their new homeland.

A more unified EU has extended downwards not just the socio-economic class of migrating Britons of retirement age but also that of the more general population. Families can better afford to emigrate and have some chance of paid work if they do, and access to benefits if they do not. All newcomers can tap into the strengths of the French system (like the "golden immigrants") joining the medical, school and child care systems considered to be the best in Europe, whilst leaving behind the UK equivalents of these, often considered to be amongst the worst in the EU. Red-tape and heavy taxation,
traditionally French features, seem more a distant inconvenience than a great burden.
In order to briefly illustrate trends relevant to the new British emigration patterns, we can now look at a few selected statistics taken from the examples of Limousin and Aquitaine.

**Limousin**
In a 3 year period there has been a five-fold increase in the British population. Some estate agents were reporting that 70% of all their business was British, and the Chamber of Commerce estimates British spending to generate 200 million euros of regional economic activity each year. In 2002 Limousin airport had a throughput of 47,000 passengers from its London route. In 2004, just two years later, numbers had more than doubled to 106,000. Services from Liverpool and Southampton were added and others like Dublin actively studied.
Villages such as Dompierre-Les-Eglises have been revived (some feel almost gentrified) by Britons who now number some 25% of the population. Here, local tax income ("taxe d'habitation") has increased by 20% in seven years and there has been additional income from fees such as for building permissions.
It is not only housing that the British search for now but businesses too. No less than fifty-two of them have been either newly created or taken over by Britons in Haute-Vienne in the fifteen months from the start of 2004.

**Aquitaine**
In Aquitaine, where ironically they were ousted at the end of 100 Years War in 1453, the British have now returned in force. In the village of Eymet for example, there is a fish and chip shop and a cricket pitch, two grand talismen of Britishness. Here, twenty years ago, it is reported, most British residents were retired, as per the typical model, but recent arrivals have been younger. With a population of between 200 and 300, no less than seventeen British children have been registered for primary school. Britons here own a boutique, computer shops, art gallery, wine cellar, two delicatessens and a bed and breakfast establishment.
French Reaction and Position

France, like many economically strong and politically stable countries, has always had many would-be immigrants eager to secure a new and better life for themselves. It has accepted economic migrants from its old empire countries, the usual influx of those marrying a French partner, and its fair share of asylum seekers and refugees. But there have been others, like the British, who have come just to enjoy the special French lifestyle. For them, as with most immigration, the initial greeting has been one of a mixture of curiosity and resentment. However, the Britons with the quirkiness of their dissimilarities to the French in culture, are often finally accepted with good humour, and in general there have been more advantages than disadvantages for the French. The British have tended to ask very little of the French government in way of benefits, yet have brought wealth with them and used it to upgrade housing stock, rejuvenating previously unfancied areas of France which had no jobs and few close facilities. They have provided useful paid work for artisans and supported businesses of all types. Garages, shops, DIY outlets, bars and restaurants, car and van rentals, "notaires" and estate agents are just some that make up the list.

However, as numbers have increased, particularly where the spread is uneven, concerns have arisen with regard to the failure to integrate and the issue of ghettos. This has come as a result of various factors. The Britons, as with all other emigrants, inevitably claim that they want to immerse themselves into their new cultural environment. However, the fact is that 80% of them are city-dwellers by nature, whereas France as a country is vastly rural in nature and culture (it was considered to be 80% rural in 1990). The locations the British inhabit are invariably country ones, selected for the peace and beauty they offer. The Britons therefore often find there are almost insurmountable social and professional differences between themselves and their hosts. Additionally, the French country folk have been undergoing an identity crisis. There has been a steep decline of population and work in country areas. The intervention of the British is seen as a potential regeneration. However, it is also seen as part of a demise of an old treasured French society. The French remain unsure of their new neighbours and unsure of themselves too. The net result is that too often the Britons end up sticking together and do not integrate fully.

In the Limousin model, it was found that local culture was being somewhat unsettled since the French were not used to inhabitants moving in and then selling-on and moving out so
readily and often. The mayor of Dompierre-Les-Eglises was worried whether the British were really wanting to stay, as some having just recently bought, were now trying to re-sell presumably for good profit. Were they going to buy again locally and remain? Back in Britain, especially in urban areas, this would be something considered much more normal.

In Brittany, things have sometimes been a little more volatile. This far north-western region is to some extent a cutting-edge in British immigration arguments. Being somewhat remote from Paris it remained fairly cheap, yet with a stunning coastline and a close proximity to England and a closer one yet to the Channel Islands, it has attracted much British attention. Here, where prices have risen by 80% in six years, the strong Gaelic emotions of independence (similar to the Cornish) have been stirred. "Bretons" were feeling increasingly unable to buy the size and quality of house they were used to. Protests were held on the streets of some towns with locals burning estate agent brochures. Sky TV News exposed on October 25th 2005 that some agents in response, have resorted to keeping two price books, one for Britons, another, less expensive, for locals.

Some regions seem to have more easily accepted the British than others. In Normandy for example, the home of William the Conqueror, World War II memories still merit respect of, and thanks to, the Britons, and integration seems easier perhaps as a result.

Although there are no accurate statistics on the subject of failed British immigrations, (i.e. numbers returning to Britain having been unable to settle in France) it seems certain inflow outnumbers outflow by a huge margin. "Breton" demonstrators actions are unlikely to have the desired result of stopping this immigration. Only continual threat, such as has been evidenced in Corsica against non-Corsicans, have been able to achieve this in the past, and then illegally. Generally, anti-immigrant behaviour only forces a greater ghetto culture. There is ample evidence of British businesses being set up to supply services to their own community which French locals had refused. But should it become too widespread, this itself could cut off benefits to the local community in terms of spending power and commercial improvements, and cause further alienation. The latter would not be ideal either, for the British. They, in general, come to France precisely for its "Frenchness" and would not want to feel that they were being held in isolation. However, although there is a moral obligation on the part of the immigrant to adapt to his new country rather than it adapt to him, nevertheless, if he cannot get baked beans from the French supermarket he will buy them at a British one if it is set
Moreover, the concerns of country people regarding cultural differences of would-be new neighbours is not confined to foreigners in general and Britons in particular. It also very much includes French city-dwellers who more and more want to retreat to the country. A survey conducted by IPSOS in May 2005 reported that 33% of French urbanites say they want to live in the country, and 12% want to continue to work professionally there. Rural worries about this regard revolve around the possible importation of urban problems such as criminality, stress and incivility.

Nor are the British the only would-be immigrants to France. The Germans and Dutch, amongst other Western European nationalities, and now those from even further afield, are recognising the attractiveness of France. The French, on their part, have not been slow to take advantage of what is being offered. Notwithstanding any inner negativity, house and land owners have welcomed the rise in value of their assets which accompanied the greater interest in them from abroad.

The Revolving Door of Europe

What greater concepts then, are driving the demographic changes discussed here? Primarily, there seem to be two. Firstly, Europe more and more operates on a ‘revolving door’ principle. Its people are becoming further identified with the European principle and gradually less with their country of birth, particularly with respect to living and working. As a result they feel more comfortably able to move and reside in other European countries, even more within the EU.

In France this trend may not be well understood. It was notable that 67% of ‘Non’ voters in the May 2005 failed referendum on the proposed European Constitution, were found to be against foreigners working in their country, according to a survey by IPSOS, presumably because of the threat to French jobs. It is true that any EU enlargement sparks economic migration from the new usually poorer countries to the established ones. Nearly half a million people legally migrated ‘west’ from the ten newest EU countries in the eighteen months since their join-up in May 2004. However, this pattern tends to flatten out over time. Thus movements between the older EU countries are now much more rotational. What may be little known by the ordinary Frenchman in terms of UK/French migration, for example, is that there are no less than 400,000 of their own fellow countrymen and women living in the UK alone. This figure bears close resemblance to
the 500,000 French houses owned by Britons, always remembering many of these are second homes and do not represent emigration and full-time residence. Similar to a revolving door, as one person enters through it another can take the opportunity to leave. The reasoning may differ of course. UK has often been seen as a place to earn, France, a place to spend. It is true that the French in the main go to the UK to work, a place where there is a more open market for skills. UK unemployment at 4.6% compares very favourably with France’s 10.1%. The British inhabit France for the diverse reasons previously discussed. Nevertheless, immigration is very much a two-way process if not necessarily reaching equality. Further inequality may be explained by the second factor.

**Southern Migration**

Within the borders of European countries the densest population areas are generally found to be the furthest south. Weather is the main factor. The south coast of England and the Mediterranean coast of France are two simple examples. This is part of a larger trend of Northern Hemisphere inhabitants desiring to migrate south towards more sunshine. Already in Chamonix, for example, there are as many Scandanavians as Britons. As the EU enlarges, easing restriction of movement of people, money and jobs, then this trend has broadened. France is therefore not to be the only country to feel the effects of southern migration. Spain is another country where British and Europeans in general have chosen not just to retire to but to live and work out of. A generation has grown up with the idea of Europe as a united concept, and that you do not have to earn your living in the same country you inhabit. Many have developed business portfolios extending across international borders. They are joined there by all the same sub-groups affecting France, and often in far greater numbers since Spain is further south. The sun factor seems to overcome problems of language and other cultural differences in the minds of those wanting to rid themselves of the cold of winter.

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Where does it all lead to from here? What consequences are there logistically for France, and emotionally for the French people? Will the revolving door and sun factors be enough to
alleviate any alarm bells within the French nation regarding immigration numbers?

To maintain some form of balance these same two latter factors to some extent will be required to impact more heavily on the home-loving French themselves. The French will need to desire to leave their homeland in greater numbers than they are currently. There is already ample evidence that this acceleration has already started and that many more Frenchmen and women are leaving for longer or shorter periods than previously. In the decade 1991 to 2002 the number of French workers living in other parts of Western Europe jumped by 51% according to Insee, the French national statistics agency. More recently, in March 2006, Capital M6 TV reported that 1000 people a month were leaving France for Switzerland to work. In Ireland, a company set up to recruit for likes of Dell and Microsoft reports 200 new applications from France every week. A survey of final-year management degree students in a Paris university revealed that 91% would actively consider a career abroad, with 66% of these preferring EU countries. Nearly 87% felt they had a better than one chance in two of achieving this objective and over 45% said they would consider staying abroad for between 5 years and full emigration. These kinds of statistics can be expected to strengthen with the fuller integration of European peoples.

With regard to southern immigration and the sun factor there are certainly signs of an impact here too. The French are increasingly taking holidays in, for them, much more non-traditional locations such as Cyprus and Turkey. Some retirees are taking long winter lets in places such as Morocco. Perhaps the French outlook is truly broadening in all of these senses and more of them will want to buy property in some of these places and perhaps eventually want to live there long term.

Larger and more permanent movements of this kind would probably require an elevation in the French housing market. It would realistically need a rise in the price differentials between itself and those of countries favoured. Selling a house in France and being able to buy something better and cheaper, and having a lump sum over is exactly the equivalent of what the British have been able to achieve in their migration to France. The French would need something similar. An increase in French property prices would also have the effect of slowing immigration to France itself since economic arguments for moving to France would not hold up so well. Overall the immigration/emigration ratio would even itself out more.

However, such a change becomes very much a political conundrum. There is implication that there would have to be fiscal adjustments made to French economic policy. Tax and
lending policies would probably need alteration in order to free up more spending and investment. This would have to occur against a current background of an economy where the GDP, although the same as other Western countries, is not creating the same number of jobs and wealth.

But no matter how the trends roll out longer-term, the simple fact is the French are not about to be ousted from their own country. France’s population is set to grow to 75 million by 2050, a 20.9% increase. By comparison, Germany at an estimated 70.8 million would be showing a decrease of 13.6%, Great Britain at 58.9 million a 1% decrease, and Italy at 43 million a 25.2% decrease. But importantly these statistics relate to birth and death rates only, and are not impacted upon by any immigration patterns. This predicted growth is of the French themselves. Whilst for the time being immigration to France looks like it will exceed emigration from it, there will be a growing number of French nationals to offset any unwanted feelings of being outnumbered and overtaken. In any event, this difference in migration numbers will not be as large as pessimists would like to believe. Subsequent to that, when all countries are equal in the EU, the revolving door will have created a truly multi-national country within each separate country, a real European Union of peoples. Nationals of all countries would understand that general immigration is not all one-way traffic, but more of a rotation.

With regard to the separate mechanics of southern immigration, this is once again a continental, if not hemispheral movement. It is certainly not confined to the British in France, who incidentally have a foot in both camps of motivation, revolving door and southern immigration. Inasmuch as the latter involves a greater Europe and its peoples, market logic dictates house prices will become higher the further south one goes (all other things being equal). This will mean a continuing elevation of pricing for the French and perhaps give greater impetus to more of them desiring to move further south themselves, perhaps to EU states such as Greece, Malta and Cyprus, although this would only continue though whilst house price differentials with France still hold positive for them.

Yet could a further factor, that of global warming still swing things around again? In a potentially hotter world in years to come, could it be that the French would want to buy second houses or even retirement homes in Scotland or Finland in order to have a nice ‘cool’ break from the sun! In such a scenario the French could not lose. Geographically France sits fairly centrally in Europe and enjoys a long north-south axis. If weather patterns did change so severely the population bulge
could shift from Mediterranean to Channel coasts. The French would also have no further to travel to Scotland and the north to avoid the sun than to Spain and the south to enjoy exposure to it.

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