

French with Tears

Just when politics were at their most boring, along comes a good old-fashioned Franco-British row to cheer us all up! It's been a quite a while since Margaret Thatcher smashed the crockery during the reverential celebrations of the bicentenary of the French Revolution by reminding everyone what a squalid and bloody affair it was - quite unlike our Own Dear Glorious Revolution. It's even some years now since The Sun's "Up Yours Delors" headline provoked a nation to fury.

It was beginning to feel as though the great traditions of Franco-British invective were on the wane. But the situation has been saved by France's Institute for International Relations. This august bit hitherto little-known body has decreed that Britain is a by-word for decline. Perhaps they are mounting a subscription drive. If so, they have picked the right issue because they have really put le chat entre les pigeons. Already the rumble of editorial heavy artillery can be heard retaliating from distant Wapping and Canary Wharf. And such fearsome warriors as Paul Johnson are honing their battle-axes to defend Britannia's honour. Look forward to red-hot reminders of centuries of French infamy!

My first response as a foreigner is to say: so what's new? The British themselves are always telling anyone who will listen that their country is in decline. Indeed a nation which feels the need to introduce gender balance into Thomas The Tank Engine stories probably is in decline!

But that is beside the point. The fact is that anyone else, from Armenians to Zaireans, can criticise Britain without provoking the slumbering lion to bat an eye-lid. But let the French criticise and the lion

is on its feet and doing its Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer act in a flash! In an election today, Kelvin Mackenzie (he of the Sun) would be returned to Downing Street in triumph.

The exchange of insults between Britain and France has a long and proud pedigree. The V-sign was first used by the English against the French at the time of Agincourt. The French were so scared of English archers that they cut the bow-fingers off any of them they captured. This led the unmaimed English to wave two fingers at the French to put the fear of God in them: and it's been going on ever since - perfidie Albion, French letter and a host of other epithets and delicious insults.

These days you don't hear many Austrians boasting about their one-time occupation of Italy, or Germans celebrating the invasion of Czechoslovakia. But give any Brit. half a chance and he will remind you of the centuries during which Britain occupied more of France than did the French Crown. The roll-call of French defeats at the hands of British admirals and generals is about the one thing which is taught in British schools. By comparison with this colourful past the opinion of some grey French bureaucrats on Britain's decline is hardly first division stuff. But where does the truth lie?

There are certainly a lot of things which France has done better than Britain. The motorways are more extensive, the trains are faster, the fashion more elegant, the life-style more glamorous. Paris is infinitely better groomed than London - though as someone unkindly pointed out, it's easier to keep your capital city looking smart if you surrendered in time to stop the Germans flattening it. The French themselves claim the sex is better in France, but one feels

that like Wolverhampton Wanderers they may be living on past glory in that respect.

But even giving them the benefit of the doubt on that, does it tell the whole story? Not exactly. For instance, we Italians are starting to feel quite grateful to the French: their corruption scandals look likely to equal or even outweigh ours. That must be at least as clear a symptom of decline as Britain's job culture. And when you start to keep a score-sheet of things like Nobel prizes, you realise that for all Britain's muddle-through complacency, it does have a capacity for excellence which France rarely matches.

Talking of decline, surely there is no better evidence of a nation in retreat than France's desperate battle to preserve its culture. A country which legislates to make it illegal to use non-French words and wants all European countries to be required by law to show home-grown (i.e. French) programmes on television is hardly a model of self-confidence.

The crux of the issue is that, for all their magnificence, the French are long-term losers. No one doubts their courage: but the roll-call of Agincourt, Blenheim, Trafalgar, Waterloo, Sedan, Fashoda, Vichy and Dien Bien Phu tells an unmistakable story. Only a nation which had lost so many battles would feel it necessary to have an Arc de Triomphe!

But I am getting drawn into a game which only the British and French should play. The fact is that both France and Britain are in relative decline and have been for years. Weakened by World Wars, overshadowed by super-powers, Suez was their low point. After that both resorted to stratagems to preserve the illusion of great power status. The French strutted their independence,

with a defence à tous azimuths based on rockets which would have wiped out their friends in Germany but not given the Russians too much to worry about. The British barked and growled on behalf of the Americans. At least we Italians didn't pretend: we just made sure that our diplomats were well-mannered and let them get on with playing the game.

Let's look on the bright side. Most people in Britain and France no longer give a damn about the historic rivalry. It's a game for the politicians, the diplomats, the bureaucrats to play, and it's about as arcane as real tennis, and a good deal less harmful than burning British lamb. Normal people are too busy raiding the French super-markets, buying houses in the Dordogne and wondering whether the Channel Tunnel really leaks to worry about who is more in decline. Why not just remember how fortunate both countries are: in their history, their achievements, their prosperity - and having such nice neighbours. If this is Decline, roll on Fall.