



The French community in London

Paris-on-Thames

The French influx to London suggests what governments can and can't do to boost their cities' allure

ONCE the quintessence of Englishness—it has Etonian board members, and emerged 125 years ago from the royal armaments factory—Arsenal Football Club has been coached by Arsène Wenger, a Frenchman, since 1996. The north London team usually fields more French players than English ones. The Eurostar trains to and from Paris even zoom past the club's Emirates Stadium, a corner of Islington that is forever France.

The Frenchification of Arsenal is perhaps the most famous example of a broader French influx to London. This, too, began in earnest in the 1990s as the city boomed with Britain's economy (though there has been a French presence since the Huguenot migration of the 17th century). Firm numbers are hard to come by; as European Union (EU) citizens, the French can move to Britain without registering with any authority. But their consulate estimates that up to 400,000 of London's 7.6m people are citizens of the republic, possibly making the French the largest minority nationality in the city.

A similar number of Britons live in France, but mainly for a sunny dotage in the bucolic south. French Londoners are often in their prime. The archetype is a banker with children at the Lycée Français in South Kensington, the established hub of the community ("the 17th arrondissement"), who misses the food and weather of home. The City, a bigger financial centre

than Paris, is keen on French workers, especially traders—products of an educational system that turns out mathematics whizzes in droves. It is rational interests, rather than cultural affinity, that draw this type of Frenchman to London: high-paid work, lower taxes (especially on wealth), and the chance to raise bilingual children.

But French Londoners have become a much more diverse group than this archetype allows. They can be found across the city, in gilded Marylebone, suburban Chiswick and the raucous east end. A new lycée will open in Kentish Town (near grungy Camden Town) this year. And though many come because of the favourable fiscal and regulatory climate created by successive British governments, some are here for reasons beyond ministers' direct control: the French invasion suggests both the ways that politicians can augment a city's allure, and how much of it is organic, spontaneous, and best left alone.

Anything goes

The superior beauty and efficiency of Paris often come at the price of dynamism. Many young French arrivals in London say they are fleeing rigid social codes, hierarchical corporate culture and a sense of distance from the global swirl of people and ideas. "It is hard to go back once you have tasted the internationalism here," says Jessica Moyal, who works in private equity.

French twenty-somethings see London

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as a "gateway to globalisation", agrees Édouard Braine, the French consul-general, who compares the ritual sojourns in the city taken by his younger compatriots to the globe-trotting gap years favoured by their British peers. Not all secure high-flying jobs: many come to study, or to work as au pairs or waiters while perfecting their English, or to find a niche in London's huge creative industries. Many young French of African or Arab origin also say that there is less discrimination in Britain.

As is true of many diasporas these days, amenities and technology allow the French to continue living a French life if they so choose, and not only because Paris is little more than two hours away by train. French Londoners have their own magazines, cinemas and cultural centres, which are all the better-resourced for being patronised by hordes of British Francophiles. French Radio London, which took to the airwaves last November, serves up French pop and news. There will even be a new constituency in the French parliament at next year's general election to represent citizens living in Britain and northern Europe (which mostly means London).

But many of the younger arrivals—the ones to be found in grimy nightclubs in Dalston rather than the boutiques of Sloane Square—come to London precisely to live a messier, less French life in the company of new people. Last year, Ewen Ledain, a French postgraduate student, conducted a survey of this neglected genre of French Londoner ("Les oubliés de St Paneras") for Le Centre Charles Péguy, a charity in Shoreditch that helps young French newcomers find jobs and accommodation. He found that very few cited a lack of work in France as their reason for coming. By far the most popular motivations were to improve their English and to experience something new.

Another London diaspora

Little Arabia

The mood on the Arab street (in Knightsbridge)

“IT IS a crime against humanity,” exclaimed Abdullah. He was among a group of demonstrators outside the Libyan embassy in Knightsbridge on February 22nd, six days after their protests began. They were preparing to march on Downing Street, in condemnation of Muammar Qaddafi’s murderous repression of the uprising against his regime. “I wish I were back there, I wish I could help,” Abdullah lamented.

Arabs in London, an online community group, reckons that there are about 300,000 Arabs living in the city, one of the biggest concentrations in Europe. It estimates that there are another 200,000 living throughout the rest of Britain. They are a mixed bunch: Egyptians, Moroccans, Iraqis, Palestinians, Yemenis and Lebanese, and some from the rich Gulf states. Many came in the 1950s and 1960s as the Middle East threw off the shackles of colonialism and revolutions broke out all over the place. Lebanon’s long civil war in the 1980s and the brutality of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq prompted others to flee to Britain.

Most support the rebellions in the Middle East. Mona El Kouedi came to London from Egypt five years ago and is now doing a PhD. “Many people are sceptical about the future of the Arab world,” she says. “But those same people were sceptical that the Arab people would ever revolt against the dictators, corruption, torture and misery of their lives.” In Libya, anything would be better than Mr Qaddafi, say many protesters.

But, though they are generally less visible than those clamouring for change, some Arabs in London are less enthusiastic about the upheaval—which in part reflects the city’s status as a few-questions-asked refuge for the global super-



At the Libyan embassy

rich, as well as a sanctuary for exiles and radicals. On the first day of the demonstrations in London those denouncing Mr Qaddafi were met by others noisily cheering him. Those with links to beleaguered regimes have particular reason to worry. At least one of Mr Qaddafi’s sons is said to keep a bolthole in the metropolis. Gamal, son of the recently departed Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, also has a London pad.

Still, most Arabs in Britain are anxiously optimistic. Muhammad, a Tunisian, works in a supermarket on the Edgware Road, London’s Little Arabia. His family is still in Tunisia. Asked whether things will turn out for the best, he smiles, shrugs and resorts to a well-worn Arabic fatalism: “God willing”.

Observers of London’s French community do not think the downturn has shrunk its numbers much. True, some bankers lost their jobs in the financial crisis, and the City is recruiting less. But France itself is hardly booming. Mr Braine says that many of the French workers in Dublin who were laid off as a result of the Irish economic crisis are trying their luck in London rather than heading straight home. London remains attractive to French entrepreneurs, too. Mathieu Laine, a 35-year-old Parisian, is moving to London to open a new branch of his firm Altermind, a business consultancy. Britain’s low and falling corporation tax rate is part of his motivation; but so is

the “wind of freedom” he feels whenever he visits the city. Crucially, the government’s new restrictions on immigration do not apply to EU citizens.

Far more likely to pull talented French people back home than Britain’s economic doldrums is the prospect of France becoming more business-friendly. Nicolas Sarkozy is chipping away at taxes and regulations, and wants Paris to expand through private-sector development. That sort of thing is within the gift of politicians. But replicating the loose, globalised way of life in London—the anything-goes culture that draws a certain kind of young French person—will be much harder. •

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