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How Britain Betrayed Macron

The President's relationship with Boris is beyond repair

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There are plenty of votes in France in bashing Muslims, bashing Brussels or bashing America. There are even some in bashing Germany. But there are none in bashing Britain.

Many votes in France turn on immigration, jobs, education or agriculture. There are few to be won or lost on sea fishing (which is 0.06% of the French economy).

Why then has **President Emmanuel Macron** gone out of his way to pick a quarrel with Britain over, at most, 180 fishing licences for French boats in English and Channel Islands waters? The simple answer to the question is: “He hasn’t.”

The British media — encouraged by the British government — has worked itself into a self-pleasing froth of Macronphobia in recent days. There are, of course, elements of French policy and behaviour which deserve criticism in this fundamentally silly dispute (silly to all but a handful of French fishers and their families). The same can also be said of some aspects of the British government’s behaviour — and its frequently misleading communication — on the Great Franco-British Fish War of 2021.

The French presidential elections on April 10 and 24 may be in the back of Macron’s mind as he fights, as he sees it, to prevent Britain from unravelling the Brexit agreement that it signed only 11 months ago. But it is fatuous to suggest — as parts of the UK media and the some members of the UK government do — that the whole row has been confected by Macron to appeal to French Anglophobes (who are a very tiny constituency) or the mighty French fishing vote (a few thousand people at most).

The licensing row directly affects, overall, fewer than 200 French boats and 1,000 people whose catches of fish and shellfish are worth €6m annually – 0.0000025% of French GDP. The economic implications for Britain are close to zero. They are scarcely bigger for the Channel Islands (many of whose fishermen are supportive of the French claims).

It is a small, very messy, very technical dispute which could be solved, with goodwill on all sides, in an afternoon; it may be resolved tomorrow when the British Brexit minister, **Lord**

Frost, meets the French Europe minister, **Clément Beaune**, in Paris.

On Monday, Macron pulled back from the brink of an explosive trade war with Britain. He suspended until Friday his threat to block British fishing boats from selling their catches in French ports and, worse, imposing full-scale customs checks on all trucks crossing the English Channel. The political body language on both sides suggests that a deal is close — though it could yet slip through the net.

Why has such a small quarrel become so huge? The simple answer is that it is part of a pattern of deteriorating post-Brexit relations between Britain and France — quarrelsome neighbours at the best of times.

Johnson knows that sticking it to the French is always an excellent tactic in a time of crisis. Meanwhile, Macron has been determined, partly for electoral reasons but mostly from personal conviction, to ensure that Britain does not slide out of its Brexit commitments. His aim is not to "punish" Britain, but to ensure that Britain should not be allowed to leave the EU and keep the benefits of staying in.

This was the argument made in a clumsily written letter to the European Commission last week by Macron's Prime Minister, Jean Castex. It was mistranslated and misconstrued — as "lets damage the UK all we can" — by both the British government and much of the British media.

There have been several nadirs in Anglo-French relations in my almost quarter century living in and writing about France: mad cow disease, foot and mouth, Jacques Chirac's refusal to join Tony Blair in the second Iraq war. But the tone of this year's Franco-British quarrels have been nastier than any of those which came before. Both leaders are partly to blame. They have encouraged, or allowed, the disputes to become too personal.

In the case of Macron, the animus, I believe, is not against Britain. It is against Boris Johnson. Macron detests populism but he has a moth-like attraction to populists, which usually goes astray. Macron once thought that he could charm and handle the British leader, just as he once thought that he could schmooze Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump.

Downing Street says that the two men are "pals". Nonsense. Neither Johnson nor Macron has pals. The French president has come to think of Johnson, Elysée sources say, as an unreliable but crafty buffoon. In other words, he has allowed the British leader to get under his skin.

Macron is leader of one of the world's richest and most powerful countries, but he has only just over four years' experience as a politician — let alone as a statesman. And as Macron's recent decision to call Australia's Prime Minister a liar shows, sometimes that lack of political education shows. Macron may be right about Scott Morrison. Many Australian politicians and officials would agree with his criticism of the AUKUS deal. But the President came over as being petty and lacking emotional control.

Something similar happened earlier this year when Macron made slighting remarks to foreign journalists on the effectiveness of the AstraZeneca Covid vaccine on the elderly. Macron was angry with AstraZeneca at the time for failing to meet its commitments to supply the EU-27 — while providing plenty of doses for the UK.

Macron does not do "palliness" but he does do pique. The standard British view — that he

has sought cross-Channel quarrels from the beginning — could not be more wrong. His anger is driven by disappointment and a sense of betrayal. He had hoped that France, as a neighbour and important military partner, would play the key role in keeping Johnsonian Britain in the European orbit.

Instead the last ten months have been scarred by a succession of Anglo-French disputes, starting with big tail-backs of trucks in England in January after France imposed strict Covid controls on travel across the Channel. There was then the row over Astra-Zeneca supplies. Then Britain accused France in July of failing to stop illegal migrants from crossing the Channel in small boats. The French retorted that Britain had promised to pay for extra police on the Calais side of the water but never handed over the money.

Britain also imposed harsh controls on travellers from France in the summer — on the bizarre grounds that a new variant of Covid was raging in the French Indian Ocean island of Réunion. The Australian submarine row merely plunged their relationship to new depths. The French government accused Britain of being an "opportunistic fifth wheel", while Johnson responded in French-baiting *franglais*: "Donnez-moi un break.".

And so to the great fish row. France does have a case. The UK also has a case. Both have acted badly. The British and Jersey governments, by imposing strict proofs of past fishing on small boats, are trying to claw back some of what was lost in the fisheries part of the Brexit negotiations. France has turned too rapidly to disproportionate threats — such as cutting the power cable from Normandy to Jersey (a threat now withdrawn). The blocked licences are not of enormous economic interest but Macron is convinced that they fit a pattern of Johnsonian Britain trying to slide out of its Brexit commitments.

Was next April's election also an issue? Perhaps at the margins. The President is doubtless anxious but his electoral position is the strongest for a sitting president in 20 years. His approval ratings are in the low 40s, high for a late term French president. The French economy is booming, growing 3% in the third quarter and likely to approach 7% in 2021 as a whole — the best among large and medium EU economies.

If Macron had electoral motives in the fisheries row, they were defensive, not proactive. He would certainly have been attacked by his rivals if French interests were seen to be steamrollered by Britain.

The big question is what happens next. Macron has come to believe that negotiation with Johnson is pointless without threats. If Britain does back down and issue more fishing licences this week, he will assume that this judgement is correct.

Things could still go wrong. The talks could collapse. Macron would then be obliged to give Johnson what Johnson (maybe) wants: a mega-row with France on which all of Britain's post-Brexit ills can be blamed.

More likely the dispute will be resolved, or sent for arbitration. That could be the occasion for a new push to improve Franco-British relations across the board.

But even if the Fish War is ended, I suspect it won't be the last post-Brexit, Franco-British row. Despite their surface chumminess at the COP26 conference on Glasgow, relations between Johnson and Macron have gone past the point of repair.

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