

Self-flattery of the English-speaking world

By Jem Eskenazi

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From Mr Jem Eskenazi.

Sir, On holiday in France, I write regarding Anthony Giddens' article "Lessons from Blair for a Royal revolution in France" (July 21). No one can deny the need for political and economic reforms in France, especially regarding employment laws (although I would like to point out that at my previous French employer, a global leader in business intelligence software, the saying was "We love the 35-hour week; we love it so much we do it twice a week").

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France, a very old culture with deep traditions, runs on a different economic and political cycle from the Anglo world, and will bring in reforms when this fits the general cultural progress of the country; not unlike Japan, another strong country with deep traditions. But to jump to the conclusion from this need for reform that France is finding it hard to adapt to the advance of information technologies and globalisation is ridiculous.

France has one of the highest broadband and mobile network penetrations of the whole western world. Before the internet, France was already a fully connected country through Minitel. France introduced a full payment system with the chip and PIN technology in 1989. In more "traditional" technologies (such as making trains and subways run, building cars, maintaining motorways) the French are in a completely different league from their Anglo counterparts; and make no mistake, these factors are essential for the general health of any economy. As for globalisation, I cannot think of a single industry where France does not have at least one successful global brand (think insurance, defence, industrial and medical gases, pharmaceuticals, transportation, energy, telecommunications, food and drinks, of course luxury items, and yes, software), and some of these brands have been global for many decades. Air Liquide, to give an example, was established in Japan in 1907. One should not confuse a few vote-oriented political decisions in France with what French business does. One should not confuse the loud noise of unions with the actual fact that France is the least unionised industrial nation in the world.

What bothers me as someone who is neither British nor French and who is currently living in Britain is the inability of the Anglo world to understand some of the strengths of France and to adopt them for its own benefit. Articles such as Lord Giddens' only reinforce the self-flattery of the English-speaking world and prevent it from seeing the strengths of other cultures, not only in economic terms but also in intellectual and artistic terms, factors that are relevant for overall quality of life.

As for a search for Ségolène Royal on Google, I did the same exercise, sitting under the French olive trees, on Google.com and on Google.fr, and the advertisements were about articles in Le Nouvel Observateur about her, Royal's, own website, and the UMP; all a lot more relevant than "buying" her on Ebay. If I permitted myself the sweeping generalisations Lord Giddens allows himself, I might suggest that perhaps information technology is used more effectively in France.

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