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The Fall of France

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There is much to be grateful for in France: an economy that boasts successful infrastructure such as its high-speed rail service, the TGV, and Airbus, as well as international businesses like the luxury goods conglomerate LVMH, all of which define French excellence. It has the best agricultural industry in Europe. Its tourism industry is one of the best in the world.

But the past two years have seen a steady, noticeable decline in France. There is a grayness that the heavy hand of socialism casts. It is increasingly difficult to start a small business when you cannot fire useless employees and hire fresh new talent. Like the Huguenots, young graduates see no future and plan their escape to London.

The official unemployment figure is more than 3 million; unofficially it's more like 5 million. The cost of everyday living is astronomical. Paris now beats London as one of the world's most expensive cities. A half liter of milk in Paris, for instance, costs nearly \$4 – the price of a gallon in an American store.

Part of this is the fault of the suffocating nanny state. Ten years ago this week, I left my home in London for a new life in Paris. Having married a Frenchman and expecting our child, I was happily trading in my flat in Notting Hill for one on the Luxembourg Gardens.

I did not mind, initially, paying higher taxes than in Britain in exchange for excellent health care, and for masterful state-subsidized schools like the one my son attends. As a new mother, I was surprised at the many state benefits to be had if you filled out all the forms: Diapers were free; nannies were tax-deductible; free nurseries existed in every neighborhood. State social workers arrived at my door to help me “organize my nursery.” My son's school lunch consists of three courses, plus a cheese plate.

But some of it is pure waste and many people are taking wild advantage of the system. I had friends who belonged to trade unions, which allowed them to take entire summers off and collect 55 percent unemployment pay. From the time he was an able-bodied 30-year-old, a cameraman friend worked five months a year and spent the remaining seven months collecting state subsidies from the comfort of his house in the south of France.

When you retire, you are well cared for. There are 36 special retirement regimes – which means, for example, a female hospital worker or a train driver can retire earlier than those in

the private sector because of their “harsh working conditions,” even though they can never be fired. But all this handing out of money left the state bankrupt.

Also, France, being a nation of navel-gazers à la Jean-Paul Sartre, refuses to look outward, toward the global village. Who cares about the BRICS – the emerging markets of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – when we have Paris? It is a tunnel-vision philosophy that will kill France.

At the World Economic Forum each year at Davos, France is always noticeably underrepresented. Last year, one junior minister, Fleur Pellerin, came because, apparently, she is the only fluent English speaker in the government. “The French don’t like to speak English,” one of her aides admitted wearily. “So they don’t like to come to Davos.”

The most brilliant minds of France are escaping to London, Brussels, and New York rather than stultify at home. Walk down a street in South Kensington – the new Sixth Arrondissement of London – and try not to hear French spoken. The French *lycee* there has a long waiting list for French children whose families have emigrated.

To wake up, France has to rid itself of the old guard, and reinvent itself. The government is so inward looking and the state *fonctionnaires* who run it are so divorced from reality that it has become a country in denial. This is partly the fault of the education system, Les Grandes Ecoles – the essential training ground for elite civil servants. Graduates like Hollande; his ex-wife, Segolene Royal, who was the Socialist presidential candidate in 2007; former president Jacques Chirac; and almost all former prime ministers since 1958 still think of France as a superpower. The sad truth is, France is closer to Spain or Italy these days than to the U.K. or Germany.

There are some business visionaries, like Christophe de Margerie, the CEO of multinational oil and gas company Total, who speaks the Queen’s English and spends much of his time working on deals outside of France. But de Margerie is rare.