

THE STATE VISIT TO AUSTRALIA
OF THE FRENCH PRESIDENT
FRANÇOIS HOLLANDE

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The visit of François Hollande to Australia in November 2014 was the first ever made by a French president to this country. After attending the G20 meeting during the weekend of 16–17 November in Brisbane, the French president flew to Nouméa, spending 24 hours there. He then returned to Australia, beginning his State visit in Sydney on Tuesday 18th November and then spending Wednesday 19th November in Canberra, before returning to France.

His visit to Sydney began with his arrival at the Fleet Steps, where he was greeted by the Governor General, Sir Peter Cosgrove, and welcomed with a ceremonial twenty-one gun salute. He then attended an official State luncheon in his honour, hosted by Sir Peter and Lady Cosgrove at Admiralty House at Kirribilli. I was privileged to attend the luncheon, on a clear blue day which showed to its best advantage this magnificent colonial building on the edge of Sydney Harbour. The occasion began when the President, arriving by car, was led across the rolling green lawns for a photo shoot against the backdrop of Sydney Harbour and the Opera House.

The other guests then met the French President, the Governor General, Sir Peter Cosgrove and Mrs Cosgrove, before being treated to a short recital of French music.

In a clear affirmation of France's presence and role in the Pacific, President Hollande was accompanied by the President of the Government of New Caledonia, Cynthia Ligeard, and the President of French Polynesia, Edouard Fitch, as well as various other dignitaries from New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna. There were 56 guests and those present included Laurent Fabius, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, General Benoît Puga, the French Director of Military Intelligence, the French Ambassador to Australia, Christophe Lecourtier, George Pau-Langevin, Minister for Overseas Territories, as well as the parliamentarian Kader Arif, a former government minister and Rugby Union player. Also present were Australian politicians Mathias Cormann, Anthony Albanese and Don

Harwin, as well as captains of industry and a sprinkling of academics and other members of the community. I had the pleasure of sitting next to Napolé Polutele, a member of the Territorial Assembly of the island collectivity of Wallis and Futuna (a 'Collectivité d'Outre-Mer'), a country of 12,000 inhabitants, a three-hour flight from New Caledonia.

In his speech of welcome, Sir Peter spoke of the historical ties linking France and Australia, regretting that no previous French president had visited Australia. He touched on the visit of La Pérouse in 1788 and on that of the Baudin expedition which visited the fledgling English colony for five months in 1802. He then evoked the bonds forged between our two countries in both the First and Second World Wars, when Australian soldiers fought on French soil. He spoke of the friendly relationship between France and Australia and collaborations which are developing in many areas, including business and education.

In his reply, Hollande, quoting Geoffrey Blainey, tactfully attributed the delay in the visit of a French president to our shores to the 'tyranny of distance'. He emphasised France's continuing gratitude for the sacrifice of Australian soldiers during the two World Wars. The President also drew attention to France's important Pacific presence, as a close neighbour of Australia, but also as regards its economic presence within Australia. He said that Sydney had been chosen as one of the focusses of his Australian visit because it is the Australian city 'where the largest number of French enterprises are present'. Cooperation too was an important theme: in the war on terror, in education and in the training of young Rugby League players whom France will send to Australia to learn the sport.

The food at the luncheon showcased Australian produce and wine. We enjoyed the delights of Queensland lobster tail with couscous and lemon myrtle aioli, followed by roast Cowra lamb with a macadamia nut and wattle seed crust and then, of course, a delicious Peach Melba with mango. A variety of fine Australian wines accompanied the food.

In the evening of Tuesday 18 President Hollande was given a rousing welcome at the reception he hosted at the Sydney Opera House for French expatriates living in Australia. All the more so, because his arrival was delayed for more than half an hour by the traffic jams caused by a Falun Gong protest outside the Four Seasons hotel where the Chinese Prime Minister, who had also been at the G20 meeting, was staying. Needing no introduction, the French president stood on the podium which was decorated

with a large blue banner bearing the words 'Communauté française' with a representation of Sydney Harbour and the Opera House, foregrounded by French and European flags.

Hollande addressed the mainly French audience for almost half an hour emphasising to his audience the significance of his visit to Australia and the closeness of the ties linking France and Australia. He talked first about the past and expressed the continuing gratitude of the French people to Australia for the participation of Australians soldiers in the First World War, where 400,000 soldiers left for the Front and 40,000 were killed defending France. He also spoke of the points of difference that had soured relations with Australia and New Zealand and delayed the development of closer ties, mentioning the nuclear testing in the Pacific.

He then turned his attention to the present and future. He noted that the large number of French people living in Australia, approximately 80,000, offered opportunities in the growth areas of innovation, research, education and investment for both Australia and France, as well as providing a contribution to the Australian cultural landscape through the dissemination of French language and culture. He touched on the common problems faced by France and Australia and the necessity for collaboration in the fight against terrorism, which would acquire even greater significance early in the new year.

After his discussion of the links between France and Australia, Hollande highlighted the differences between the two nations. He commented on what it is to be French and the role that it was incumbent on France to play today on the world stage, based on values that are incarnated in the French nation: liberty, equality, dignity and respect. He first addressed the difficult problem of the increasing number of refugees in the world and the responsibility of the developed nations in this area, emphasising France's traditional role as a safe haven for those who leave their native land because of persecution. France, he asserted, has never had recourse to barbed wire to keep out refugees. He reiterated the need for a unified front on the part of all nations in the fight against global warming, continuing the firm stand he had taken on the question during the G20 meetings.

His speech was a stimulating and impressive one, striking a chord with all those present, whatever their political persuasion or nationality. This was evident in the warm atmosphere and in the way the audience thronged to speak to him during the customary *bain de foule* that followed his talk.

While he was in Sydney, Hollande also attended meetings with representatives of French businesses in Australia and also a dinner at the Aria restaurant at Circular Quay, organised by the French company Polyglot, a firm which facilitates the implantation of French companies in Australia.

On Wednesday 19th, the President visited Canberra where the main focus was the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of World War I. He and Prime Minister Abbott planted an oak tree together at the War Memorial Park, in a mix of Australian and French soil that was dug up from around the Australian War Memorial in Villers-Bretonneux in France, the site of a famous World War I battle which was decisive in the Allied victory, and in which many Australian soldiers lost their lives.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott then hosted a lunch at the National Art Gallery in honour of the French president. During his Canberra visit, Hollande also visited Telopea Park School and the National Museum of Australia where he and Abbott signed an agreement for the return to Australia of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remains in French public collections.

In the short time he was in Australia, Hollande focussed comprehensively on key issues concerning the relationship between France and Australia. Commercial links and trade between the two countries were both high on the agenda, and Hollande, in his Opera House speech, expressed satisfaction with the fact that the balance of payments between the two countries was, exceptionally for France, in France's favour.¹ Education and defence were also recurring leitmotifs of the visit, as was climate change.

Whatever the problems that President Hollande faces in France, he revealed himself during his Australian visit to be a politician with convictions and vision, sadly a rare commodity in the Australian context.

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¹ Australia mainly imports aeronautical, defence and transportation equipment (Airbus, Thales, Safran, Alstom, Bouygues Construction) and French companies hold contracts in Australia for public transport, water management and waste collection.