

ADDRESS TO THE ANNUAL DINNER OF ISFAR, 31 JULY 1998

by M. Rollon Mouchel-Blaisot, Consul General for France

I would like to thank Dr Alastair Hurst, the President of ISFAR, for his kind invitation to speak to you tonight, and also to congratulate the Institute for its outstanding work in the study of French-Australian relations.

Dr Hurst suggested that I say a few words about the Cannes Film Festival, after the tribute organised in Melbourne last month. However, I hope he will forgive me if I do not follow his initial request about the French cinema. Given the more recent actuality of the World Cup and the Tour de France, I would like to talk about these two great sporting events and their meaning for both France and Australia.

I am sure that it is not necessary to describe once again the outstanding French victory against Brazil in the "greatest sporting show on earth". Our own final was broadcast to more than 1.7 billion people! But there are nonetheless some interesting conclusions that may be drawn from it.

The extremely professional organisation of the games by the ten hosting cities is yet another indication that France is succeeding in distancing itself from a certain stereotyped image in the popular imagination. The clichés of beret and baguette don't do justice to the fact that France is a highly technological country with a competitive economy. It is much more appropriate to mention the successful rocket Ariane, the Airbus industry and the superfast train, the TGV, which has been operating in France for seventeen years. Its technology might be bringing Melbourne closer to Sydney in the very near future.

It is important to note as well that France is the world's fourth largest economic power: our Gross National Product is five times Australia's, we are the world's fourth goods exporter, and second services and agribusiness exporter after the USA. Statistics show that a French worker exports twice as much as an American and 50 per cent more than a Japanese.

Through the World Cup, France has also proven that it is a genuinely welcoming country, and the most popular tourist destination in the world. Last year, 67 million tourists visited France, whose tourist attractions among the most remarkable in the world. And this year's figures will probably be boosted even further by the World Cup.

There is an expectation in some people's minds that the French are arrogant, but my compatriots have been making efforts to reverse any such tendency. They have been learning foreign languages and have successfully taken up the challenge of hosting the games.

The multi-ethnic composition of the winning team is yet another proof that at present, as through its history, France has been willing to integrate individuals of different origins or nationalities into its population. France is a country which has never identified itself with a territory, a race or a religion. The French victory at the World Cup certainly highlighted these facts: Platini, who was co-president of the World Cup Organisation Committee and one of our best players ever, is of Italian origin; Alain Mimoun who won the marathon at the Olympics in Melbourne in 1956 was of North African background. Zinedine Zidane has proved that you don't have to come from a wealthy or exclusive suburb to make it to the top.

And I can only add that the French players gave France and the world a lesson in fraternity and unity, relegating those who harbour extremist ideas and those defeatists who always complain to the background. In my view, they did more for our society than some fellow citizens who seem quick to forget their links with France.

In France, there is a push for integration and blending into the national identity. On the other hand, Australia's strength lays on its multicultural society, thanks to the first inhabitants of Australia and then the different waves of immigrants who came to this country.

On this subject, I would like to express the wish that Australia will remain a welcoming country for foreigners and will facilitate skilled immigration from Europe and particularly from France.

Even if France is still bathing in the intoxicating happiness of the victory, and might even do so for at least the next four years, the latest sporting thrill has come from the Tour de France, the greatest cycling event.

On this occasion, Australia has been on the World news with Stuart O'Grady, who is the first Australian to wear the yellow jersey. His outstanding performance might stimulate more of your compatriots to join this great adventure that is cycling and spread the beauty of this sport. Australia certainly doesn't lack either the space or the dramatic scenery to design a fantastic Tour.

We started the Tour almost a century ago, and it has been a fantastic tool to promote France ever since. Some mountain passes are legendary with the exploits of some famous French cyclists like Bernard Hinault, Jacques Anquetil, Louison Bobet or foreigners like Fausto Coppi, Eddy Merckx and Miguel Indurain.

The media faithfully report the dramas and amazing victories taking place amidst the dramatic scenery of the Pyrenees and the beauty of the Alps. The images are superb and the enthusiasm is strong. The Tour is so popular that many neighbouring countries have expressed the wish to host the competition, so this year the Tour started in Ireland and today it is in Switzerland.

It is unfortunate that especially this year, the Tour has been tarnished with drug-related problems and judiciary consequences. This is a shame for the cyclists who are often victims of pressure from sponsors, trainers and doctors, and for the public who are obviously disappointed. I do understand their anger, but this action was necessary to do a major clean-up and I think it will help the sporting authorities to act against drugs. It seemed unfair to me to sack the Festina Team, as everyone was guilty; it was the law of silence as always, but perhaps we could now admit that it was the law of silence. Hopefully it might create an awareness of these matters which have been plaguing other major international sporting events.

I must admit that I was quite surprised by Mr Juan Antonio Samaranch's lenient declaration about drugs and I hope that Australia will keep abiding by its tough drug policy for the Sydney Olympics.

Both sporting events have raised considerable enthusiasm in France and Australia and their consequences are of interest and importance to both our nations.

I hope my modest contribution to your study of French-Australian relations has not been too lengthy, as both subjects are close to my heart.

Some of you have done me the honour of attending the celebrations of our national day, Bastille Day. I designed this event to be very different from the previous ones, and wished to convey the general idea of competitive French technology together with our traditional way of life.

Bastille Day was also the occasion for me to present the Legion of Honour, the highest French decoration, to a surviving Australian World War 1

veteran, Herbert Perry, who had served in France. It was a very emotional moment of remembering and honouring those who came to fight with us in our country.

In conclusion, I would like to wish ISFAR the best of luck for the future, and I look forward to your Institute's association in important French events, such as the exhibition on the French Parliament at the Queen's Hall. For this and many other reasons, your support and attendance will be much appreciated.

Vive la France, Vive l'Australie

Rollon Mouchel-Blaisot

Consul-General of France

APOLOGY

We apologise for the absence from our last number (24) of the customary information about ISFAR and *Explorations* on the inside front and back covers, particularly as it was referred to in our Foreword. So far the cause remains unfathomable.

The Editorial Committee