

*LE MAL NAPOLEONIEN* AND THE GLOBAL MALAISE  
A JOSPIN FESTIVAL IN MELBOURNE<sup>1</sup>

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In an isolated nation continent like Australia there is still something important about welcoming a distinguished international visitor.<sup>2</sup> There is also something special about a French cultural occasion, where ideas meet diplomacy, both fuelled by hors d'oeuvres and a French drop. Australians going to France for international and European Australian Studies conferences, and French Studies conferences, have strong sensory memories of their experience—the receptions, the savouries, the cheeses as well as the conferences. While the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonies feted visitors, from English royals to travelling writers and performers, as in Jana Verhoeven's account of Max O'Rell's tours, does such colonial deference, also known as 'small country syndrome', continue (Verhoeven 2008)?

Or, perhaps, especially with political leaders, does it happen a little less these days? And, in these neo-liberal times, are such occasions less common when the guest comes from a party called 'socialist'?

In December 2014, a former French socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin (1997–2002) came to Melbourne for a number of events. The visit was coordinated by the French Embassy's university liaison person, Catherine Hodeir, and Kerry Mullan of RMIT University, on behalf of ASFS (Australian Society for French Studies). While the visit might be viewed as a travelling festival, this discussion focuses on Jospin's Melbourne visit, in particular the Tom Nairn Lecture of RMIT University's international Globalism Research Centre, drawing on his book *Le Mal napoléonien* (which he translated as 'the scourge of Napoleon')<sup>3</sup> and its relationship to today (Jospin 2014). Feting was on the celebratory menu. Dinners, including

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Tony Ward, the anonymous referees and the editors for their comments on the article and their suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> See discussion of the welcome to visitors, 'Ceremonial visions of Australia' in Alomes and Bessant 1987, pp. 49–58.

<sup>3</sup> English language discussions of the book sometimes define 'mal' as 'wrongs' or 'evils'. Jospin's central point is Napoleon's destructive impact and then his destructive legacy.

that of ASFS combined with the ISFAR (Institute for the Study of French-Australian Relations) annual dinner, a State Library reception with waiters wearing tricolour bow ties and with serviettes in red, white and blue, were all part of the fare. This most unusual Jospin Festival<sup>4</sup> in Melbourne, a ‘fête Jospin’, was followed by other events in Sydney and Canberra.<sup>5</sup>

In Melbourne Lionel Jospin also gave time for a session with graduate students, in the tradition of a French political summer school.

The Tom Nairn lecture was given in an appropriate modernist setting, the art deco Capitol Theatre, brutalist in form, even with the enhancement of floral arrangements in two Grecian urns at the front of the stage. Introduced by Dr Damian Grenfell, director of the Globalism Research Centre, and the multifaceted Dr Ziggy Switkowski, wearing one of his hats as Chancellor of RMIT University, the centrepiece of the evening comprised the two nation-builders, former prime minister of Australia, Paul Keating and Lionel Jospin.

It is perhaps significant that the audience came out of respect for a former French Prime Minister, maintaining an old, if perhaps threatened, French tradition of respect for the high officeholders of the past. It is something Australia might consider emulating. On this night, in contrast, the attraction of Paul Keating, who introduced Jospin and his themes, may have been different. The attractions were not just his considerable achievement as Treasurer and leading policymaker in the Hawke government for just under a decade and then Prime Minister, but his other aspects: a theatrical presence, a powerful and caustic tongue, a sense of drama befitting Burton and Taylor, his style and Italian suits, the subject of a successful political musical, and his rhetoric. Keating may never have chosen ‘the Paris option’, and actually stayed in the country which he once called ‘the arse end of the world’, but his performance on the political stage was unforgettable—whether you approved or disapproved.

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<sup>4</sup> Political fetes, in the French meaning, festivals, have a long lineage, including the Festival of Reason of 1792 in the French Revolution, as well as other festive moments. The French Communist Party has a *Fête de l'Humanité* while all major French parties have summer schools which include both traditional festive and contemporary pop culture elements. (See Hunt 1986 and Ozouf 1976.)

<sup>5</sup> He delivered his Napoleon lecture at the Alliance Française in Sydney and at the Australian National University in Canberra.

The event which brought two great reformers together has a larger significance. As different as they are, Australia and France share important connections. They transcend the time and space of British imperialism in the South Pacific and the invading Australian colonists' fears of the French navigators and the possible creation of a 'Terre Napoléon' on a land which later celebrated the idea of 'a nation for a continent' (Scott 1911; Hunt and Carter 1999).

In the globalising present the two societies, like all their developed world peers, share certain socio-cultural tendencies. One is a sense of the social and cultural myths of history, as in the grand exhibition *Napoleon: Revolution to Empire* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2012 with the hero's (or historical celebrity's) name up in neon outside the grey walls of the art monolith (Gott et al., 2012).<sup>6</sup> Even more importantly, both body politics share a sense of political disillusionment, an epidemic of populist alienation, whereby citizens often fear that their elected representatives are no longer in touch with them. Both patterns are relevant to Jospin's fusion of historical and contemporary themes regarding 'representation' in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary era and today—the destructive impact of Napoleon and of his myth and his autocratic legacy and the malaise of today, even as the Australian economy prospers more than that of France.

Citizen Jospin spoke at many functions and interacted, in French and English, with those there with a gentle manner and considerable charm. In the best of the revolutionary spirit and of French culture, the *énarque*, Sciences Po graduate and former prime minister seemed like a kind man who treated every other *citoyen* with due respect. Perhaps it is odd, and may say something about growing divisions between people in these corporate hierarchical days, that we need to make this remark about an important person, of any nationality or position.

Lionel Jospin worked very hard as he sang for his many suppers, as well as publicising his book. The Tom Nairn Lecture, in honour of the Scottish Left nationalist and globalist, who was amongst the pioneers of the RMIT University Globalism Research Centre, was the centrepiece. Nairn

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<sup>6</sup> One aspect of Napoleon's international ventures transcended mere imperialism—the strong scientific presence in the Pacific voyages and in Egypt. That was one theme of the 2012 Melbourne exhibition, especially as Josephine populated the property at Malmaison with Australian flora and fauna.

had earlier co-authored a book, *The Beginning of the End, France May 1968*, which explored the contradictions of the radical and reform movements of that historical moment; Australian equivalents in the years of Sixties radicalism over Vietnam and beyond similarly call out for further analysis (Nairn and Quattrocchi 1968).

The political limitations of May 1968 are relevant to Jospin's argument. In our era of over-compression, this theme might be telegraphed as Napoleon's destructive legacy: the erosion of the progressive ideals and representativeness of the early years of the Revolution, the legacy of his international military campaigns. Jospin linked these legacies to current and earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century problems in Europe and around the world: from political disengagement to continued wars.

Jospin's thematic ideals in the book take account of the importance of representation and dialogue and the realities of conflict. These three subjects provided the themes of the ASFS conference at which he was guest of honour and a keynote speaker. More importantly, they provide a connection, in terms of the argument of his book, between the Napoleonic past and the contemporary situation. Only the third sphere characterised the regimes of Napoleon, while the legacy of his inevitable defeat, France's defeat, was also a defeat for Enlightenment and revolutionary ideals. In contrast to the Napoleonic era, the current discontents have roots in failed representation due to an excess of dialogue, although it is also characterised by emerging conflict, within the developed world and without. Jospin even perceived a link to a later great catastrophe, World War I and then World War II—'this terrifying war with 60 million dead, for the most part civilians'. As a former political leader, he understands that history's horror is more significant than its moments of glory and their individual personifications.

The strength and perhaps the weakness of M. Jospin's conspectus of the history of Europe and beyond since Napoleon was its considerable detail. Did it mirror aspects of his political career story? Lionel Jospin was a successful prime minister, who also corrected the distortions of approved historical memory, renaming 'les événements d'Algérie' as 'la guerre d'Algérie'. He implemented a large legislative program in France between 1997 and 2002, including universal health insurance for those on low incomes, expanded social security, civil partnerships and the much debated 35 hour working week.

Jospin's strength as a reformer was his capacity to master and implement detailed programmes and plans. At the same time, his unprecedented loss as the Socialist Party candidate in the first round of the 2002 presidential election may have derived in part from a vision which was expressed in detail. There are other significant reasons: the five candidates of the Left who split the vote and the rising far right populist wave of Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National. In the contemporary era of the image, some visual limitations may have mattered: Jospin's prematurely grey hair and a manner which some deemed to be bland.<sup>7</sup> While relative blandness when in government can be a benefit (Angela Merkel in Germany, Steve Bracks in Victoria), during an election campaign in a media age it can present a serious deficiency. Strangely, and unjustly, for those in Australia or elsewhere who know little of the detail of French politics, but have heard the name Jospin, it is 2002 with which he is most associated, which in the vernacular we might call his 'Waterloo'.

In his introduction to the lecture, Paul Keating, the thinker rather than the Honourable Paul Keating the political animal, emphasised a key background to the story Jospin would tell of the democratic achievements of the French Revolution, despite the stains on the ideal. Among the stains were the erosion of citizens' rights under the dictatorship and military leadership of Napoleon. The Enlightenment was central in recognising the rights of man, that sovereignty rested with the people rather than with monarchs or with imagined unearthly beings ('gods'). Despite the imperfections (bourgeois suffrage rather than universal suffrage, the reality of slavery), human rights were becoming recognised. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 would be echoed even more strongly in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. That charter was endorsed by the United Nations under the presidency of the Australian Labor politician Dr H. V. (Bert) Evatt who had played a crucial role in drafting the document.

The Honourable Paul Keating could never go on stage to be just a warm-up act. In a tradition with echoes of Napoleon he was likely to put the

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<sup>7</sup> In the first round of the 2002 presidential election the voting percentages of the leading seven candidates were: Jacques Chirac 19.9; Jean-Marie Le Pen 16.9; Lionel Jospin 16.2; François Bayrou 6.8; Arlette Laguiller 5.7; Jean-Pierre Chevènement 5.3; Noël Mamère 5.2. There was a total of 16 candidates. Source: <http://www.electionresources.org/fr/president.php?election=2002>.

crown on his own head. The former manager of the Bankstown rock group, the Ramrods, the self-styled Placido Domingo of Australian political theatre, the aficionado of opera, classical music and Napoleon III or French empire clocks, would always be a star turn, wherever he came in the night's bill. In a sense his drama and forthrightness complemented rather than challenged the more nuanced and restrained presentation of Lionel Jospin. Many had come to hear the former French prime minister talk about his book on the myth, the evil or the scourge of Napoleon in French life and thought. Others had been attracted by the known local star, the ineffable Paul Keating, as well as the visiting star. Many would have enjoyed both performances. Keating highlighted in strong brushstrokes several key themes in the Jospin argument, while Jospin took the audience on a journey through the forests of European and then world history. Keating and Jospin provided an unlikely but most interesting odd couple; their complementary performances, their *pas de deux* on this stage entertained and stimulated the audience.

In his lecture Jospin eloquently ranged across European and world history. He demonstrated how the weakening of representation under the Napoleonic regimes eroded the importance of representation in French politics. That tendency is particularly important today when a growing popular feeling suggests that 'politicians are out of touch', to interpolate a recurring Australian phrase (Alomes 2004). He argued well two aspects of international relations. One, that Napoleon had failed to maintain consistent European alliances thereby ensuring his armies' eventual and inevitable defeat. Significantly, the European legacy was a century of the dominance of the monarchies and therefore the *anciens régimes* in most of Western Europe after the Treaty of Vienna of 1814.<sup>8</sup> In something of a leap, he advanced the powerful suggestion that the USA and Western Europe had made a post-Cold War error in seeking to bring the countries of Eastern Europe into the Western orbit rather than these countries playing a role as a bridge between Russia and Western Europe. Contrasting recent events in Ukraine (now seeking to join NATO) and in Hungary (with a leadership closer to the Putin authoritarian model) may confirm that analysis.

To challenge the legacy of Napoleon, beyond the Code Civil of 1804 and the institutions which helped shape the evolving French state, may lead to

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<sup>8</sup> This was the dominant pattern despite the unsuccessful revolutions of 1848 and the unification and development of Italy.

questions about aspects of French imperial tradition and also the current cult of celebrity. Napoleon's citizen armies inaugurated the era of mass killing in modern warfare by increasing the scale of war, although the full impact would not be felt until the American Civil War and the first mass slaughter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Great European War which became World War One (Bell 2007). Today, Napoleon as national and imperial hero has arguably morphed into a celebrity in the era of images and narcissism. In contrast to those who adore the great man, in France and beyond, the state has continued to refuse to endorse commemorations of Napoleonic bicentenary anniversaries. Nor, it might be added, is the critique of Napoleon new. An old Left tradition has persistently condemned Napoleon, who as emperor took on the roles and symbols of Caesar. An indictment was prosecuted in Claude Ribbe's 2005 book, *Napoleon's Crime*, while the conservative politicians Jacques Chirac and Dominique de Villepin boycotted a ceremony marking the battle of Austerlitz, his greatest military victory (Ribbe 2005).

From the global 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective of a former British sub-imperialist colony, once afflicted with the racial ideology of the era, perhaps the great European powers of the past, such as Britain and France, also need to confront their imperial past and its political-cultural legacy. When the emperor, and later the president, embodies 'la gloire de la France', perhaps there is an unfortunate Napoleonic continuity. In the era of celebrity, of which Jospin to his cost was not a part, and even given the difference in presidential majesty of de Gaulle, Chirac and even Mitterrand by comparison with the pop style of Sarkozy, perhaps Jospin's book has opened, or re-opened, only the first can of worms in the French ideological-political tradition. On 11 November 2014, the British recognised the horror of World War I, appropriately wearing black suits and through a work of art and memory, 'Blood Swept Lands and Seas Of Red' by ceramic artist Paul Cummins. One poppy was placed around the moat of the Tower of London for every dead 'British' human being—888,246 poppies filling the moat, each representing a British or colonial death during the conflict. This symbolic recognition of war's barbarism (albeit expressed in national and imperial terms) contrasts with the more expensive and celebratory Australian 'commemoration'. In an era of global conflict, the impact of empire and its contemporary legacies in Britain, France and Australia, including popular views of other peoples and races, also needs to be addressed.

To raise such questions, after Jospin has opened the castle dungeon door, is not to deny the concept of human rights which arose in the Enlightenment, nor the ideals of *Liberté Égalité Fraternité* which emerged during the Revolution (even though women did not get the vote in France until 1944, over four decades after women in Australia). Nor is it to deny, after the Corsican and after Tom Nairn, the concepts of national independence on revolutionary principles which saw the gradual dismantling of the European empires during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nor is it to deny the fact of the continuity of informal cultural and economic empires and their military power which are significant today—a dependent provincial situation does not always require formal colonial status.

There remains a celebration of Napoleon as the ‘great man’, and great men have not gone from popular social myth, despite more politically correct ideologies in academia. One Facebook respondent to a *Newsweek* article on how Napoleon divides France, Wulfe Burgoyne of Wasilla High School in the United States, declared that ‘Napoleon Bonaparte is one of the greatest men to have ever lived. Vive l’Empereur!’<sup>9</sup> That exhortation has been heard at many of the bi-centenary re-enactments in France since 1989, even while the French state distances itself completely from celebrations of the soldier, the consul and the emperor.

But perhaps, as I have argued regarding two contemporary theatres of public display, Australian sport and the repertoire of presidents Sarkozy and Berlusconi in politics, today the ‘hero’ has been replaced by ‘celebrity’ (Cashmore 2006; Alomes 2012, 66–81, 114–15, 139–142; Alomes and Mascitelli 2013, 30–43).<sup>10</sup> Perhaps what we really mean, in the contemporary argot is ‘rebranded as’—as in the story of Napoleon, as in the idea of the ‘great man’ in history, it is still about power and its embodiment in an individual. That tendency is perhaps all the stronger because we live in depoliticising

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<sup>9</sup> A Facebook response to Brian Eads, ‘Why Napoleon’s Still a Problem in France’, *Newsweek*, 8 May 2014 at <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/05/16/why-napoleons-still-problem-france-250223.html>

<sup>10</sup> In his lecture, Jospin showed a healthy distaste for patriotism when morphed into militarist nationalism, when ‘the cult of the leader [is] imposed upon the masses’.



times: what I have termed a ‘consumocracy’ and others might term a media or screen culture.<sup>11</sup>

The very political disengagement which was the focus of Jospin’s discussion of the contemporary political malaise includes an excess of dialogue in many European forums—‘Europe has become an expert in dialogue’, Jospin remarked. The ‘democratic void’ which has resulted also had rather different anticipations in the autocratic Napoleonic regimes. The view of the European Union as just a talk shop encourages many citizens to believe that many of their ‘representatives’ no longer represent them. Sometimes, such popular alienation results in a turning to the outsider, such as Le Pen. Sometimes, it results in a longing for a great man, or for distraction from a glittering celebrity. Perhaps the image of Napoleon, the Corsican *Napoleone Buonaparte*, who became the great emperor of France and Europe for only a short time, has become far more powerful over the centuries than the great man ever was in his own time.

The popular desire for a leader, a saviour in difficult times, provides inevitable echoes of the Napoleonic myth in France. It was also the major reason Australians voted against a republic in 1999, rejecting the plan for a president chosen by the parliament due to a preference which I have termed ‘populist presidentialism’ (Alomes 2014, 475–480). In times of malaise, either contemporary French disenchantment in face of high unemployment, poor economic growth and corruption or the Australian public’s pessimistic tendency to see a glass less than half full (despite the best performing economy in the OECD after the 2007 Global Financial Crisis), the populist idea of a leader becomes stronger. Far Right political ideas and movements, along with populist distrust of ‘politically correct’ so-called elites and prejudice against minorities and outsiders, bring an unpleasant odour to the body politic (Sawer & Hindess 2004). Perhaps this is our contemporary malaise which so infects politics and the larger society.

Some would ask whether in the old Left tradition, Jospin’s negative view of Napoleon’s rule was also aimed at the autocratic presidential role created by de Gaulle in the 5th Republic. Isn’t Jospin’s target, like Mitterrand in an earlier incarnation, the myth of de Gaulle as much as that of Napoleon? Significantly, Jospin’s critique was published at a time when the Socialist president, François Hollande, seemed incapable of displaying

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<sup>11</sup> On consumocracy see Alomes 2014, pp. 474–475, 478–484.

presidential mien, as well as being unable to solve France's post-GFC problems.

The historian of corruption Robert Neild described de Gaulle's presidential concept in these terms: de Gaulle's intention, 'following in the footsteps of Napoleon' was 'to keep ultimate power in his own hands as head of the executive' and it also indicated 'the willingness of the French people to accept that degree of autocracy' (Neild 2002, 102).

After centuries of European imperialism, and now at a time when the centre of the old West is under challenge, Jospin placed the continent in the context of today's globalising changes, addressing the relationship between past and present. The past's legacy has the good—the Enlightenment and the rejection of divine right by sovereign monarchs, human rights, aspirations towards a degree of equality, liberty and fraternity—and the bad, the Terror, the loss of representation under Napoleonic rule, and the barbarism of imperialism and its attendant mechanisms, war, repression and exploitation.

In the contemporary era we see contrast: social and economic progress, but growing inequality in the developed (once mainly Western) world; and the problems which arise from inequality and poverty, as well as primitive religious belief, in Africa and the Middle East. A month later, after the fundamentalist Islam inspired terrorist killings in Sydney and Paris, we might also note another French and Australian theme, secularism, as in the French law of *laïcité* and the similar de facto practice of Australian society. Jospin and Keating were both nation-builders, even with their critical skills. Jospin concluded his lecture on a positive note, insisting that Europe had to find 'its sense of history' and had to find its 'new historical projects'. It had to 'find its *raison d'être*'.

Today, as before, we should heed Jospin's call to look beyond imperial grandeur and display and beyond the Emperor, Napoleon, to the better traditions of the French Revolution. As Paul Keating emphasised, we should also look to its Enlightenment foundations. That is not easy, but as Lionel Jospin demonstrated in his reforming prime ministership, it can be done. Perhaps that is the global message of our contemporary 'Festival of Reason' in its 2014 expression as a 'fête Jospin'.

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