



I LIKE THE FRENCH

BY DAVID LOWE

I'm often asked to appear on chat shows to give an English point of view. Having one foot in England and the other foot in France is an ideal position pour *pisser dans La Manche*, if you'll pardon my French. We English say "if you'll pardon my French" to excuse ourselves for having said something rude.

During my live commentary on William and Kate's wedding, I made the very first mention of Pippa's bottom (a world scoop for M6). When Margaret Thatcher died, I made the remark that the nomination of an Argentinian pope just before Thatcher's death seemed to prove the existence of God, at least for Argentinians. During the last football World Cup, I talked about Wayne Rooney's hair transplant, making reference to the Samson myth – not sure that Europe 1 listeners got it. I think I called Lady Di a *petasse* live on BFMTV in another interview, where I was extolling the merits (and beauty) of Camilla – I was talking with tongue in cheek. In a word, I'm a bit of a loose cannon, incapable of using corporate, consensual language. When I'm told to turn left, I turn right. I'm English, *quoi*.

I call my participation in these talk shows *faire la manche* (i.e. panhandling), as they are not usually paid, but you can beg expenses. My latest invitation was for Alexandra Sublet's talk show (*Un Soir à la Tour Eiffel*, FR2), where the subject was why the English hate the French, which I don't, but I pretended to – a devil's advocate. It made a bit of a splash, because the presenter mistook James Cameron for David Cameron. Big deal! One directs films, the other a country, both oscillating between documentary and fiction.

This sort of criticism seems at first sight like *cracher dans la soupe* or "biting the hand that feeds you", since I live here and work here and pay my taxes here... but I LIKE THE FRENCH! I LIKE THE FRENCH! I LIKE THE FRENCH! I LIKE THE FRENCH!

It's true that Alexandra Sublet seems to have an extraordinary number of teeth when she smiles (rather like a beautiful Cro-Magnon woman?), and her name for me reads "sublet" (*sous-louer*), and the Eiffel Tower does resemble an electricity pylon, a giant meccano which sparkles every sixty minutes, as if there's some sort of short circuit. But it is essential for a civilized person to know the French language. It's not that difficult, since French has a much smaller vocabulary than English.

So I want to make sure that you end this series of Anglo/French articles with the right impression: I don't hate the French; it's great to be here! It's not as if I tell jokes that are supposed to insult the French like: "How many men does it take to defend Paris? – We don't know; it's never been tried." Or, "For sale: second-hand French army rifle – never used." Just before this latest chat-show appearance, a French comedian told me that she once went into a shop in London and on the door was a notice saying "No Dogs and No French". I'm sure this was a little joke on behalf of the shopkeeper, but I replied quick as a flash: "*Pourtant les Anglais aiment bien les chiens*". Just a joke, like Hannibal Lecter when he said he adored the French... they tasted like chicken!

They keep on asking me to criticize the French on television, but my wife's French, dammit! It creates awful problems for me when I get home. Take, for example, the time I said on France Inter radio that the Arc de Triomphe was built to celebrate the triumph of completing the Arc de Triomphe. "An Englishman is modest, so modest that he's always bragging about his modesty," replied my wife. "Why are the French so disliked by the British?" she asked. "They're not just disliked by the British, but by everyone," I answered. But that's the whole point; nobody likes you. You're arrogant, selfish, impolite, lazy, self-centred, etc., etc., but the thing is that we like not liking you. You and your country are superior. The worst thing you could do would be to make yourself likeable, like a politician in search of votes. You gave us the word "chauvinistic", now use it with pride – but deserve it!

PS It's the bicentenary of the Battle of Waterloo on the 18th June.