



AUSTRALIA: A NEW MOMENTUM FOR A HIGH-PROFILE PARTNERSHIP

Minutes of the France-Australia interparliamentary group's visit to Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne

7 to 15 November 2015

A year after the first state visit by a French President to Australia, a delegation of the France-Australia friendship group travelled to Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne from 7 to 15 November 2015. The delegation consisted of the friendship group's President, Mr Marc Daunis, and Vice-Presidents Mr Jean-Léonce Dupont and Mrs Catherine Procaccia, along with Mr Didier Marie.

The trip had several objectives: to represent our country at the First World War Centenary Commemorations; to explore opportunities to increase cultural and scientific cooperation; and to support ongoing economic projects.

Given its timing in the run-up to the Paris Climate Conference, the visit was also a chance to share of the country's stance – of particular strategic importance against the background of environmental issues in the South Pacific.

The senatorial delegation got the measure of the **strong bonds** linking France to Australia, rooted in a shared history and common values, and **the dynamics of bilateral relations** since President François Hollande's visit.

I. Consolidating historic bonds

A- Brothers in Arms

France and Australia forged very strong links during the First World War when thousands of men came to fight in Europe.

Not everyone is aware that Australia sent more than 420,000 troops to support the Allies on a population of about 5 millions and their contingent suffered the highest percentage of casualties among all the British Empire's forces.

Altogether, it is estimated that 54,000 Australians lost their life in WWI and more than 130,000 were wounded in action.



Remembrance Day ceremony at the French Embassy, 11 November

Australia's identity as a nation was to a large extent forged on the battlefield where the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) underwent a baptism by fire. First came Gallipoli in Turkey on 25 April 1915, and then the summer of 1916 saw the carnage of Fromelle, Pozières, Villers-Bretonneux and other Somme battles take its toll on antipodean troops.

40,000 soldiers from Australia are laid to rest in France, and a powerful bond with France has arisen from shared remembrance of each nation's war casualties. Nearly 300,000 Australians still come and pay their respects at the Somme's WW1 Cemeteries each year.

In Sydney the delegation visited the Alliance Française to pay tribute to the fallen and to attend the inauguration of a contemporary artwork commemorating the First World War – a sculpture by Australian artist Susan Foster.

In Canberra the delegation took part in a Remembrance Day ceremony in the presence of Australia's leading statesmen and Charles, Prince of Wales.

The previous day, members of the delegation had attended a deeply moving ceremony in honour of a young soldier killed in action, and heard the Last Post played at the Australian War Memorial (AWM).



Wreath-laying at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra

President Marc Daunis gave a speech at the French Embassy on 11 November, before the French community and a large number of military figures. Recalling "the steadfast friendship between our peoples", he also emphasised that "our friendship deepens and grows stronger every day in a huge diversity of ways, yet always in line with the values that brought us together a century ago."

In Melbourne, President Daunis presented the Légion d'Honneur to eight WW2 Australian veterans who took part in the Liberation of France, in a particularly moving ceremony at the city's Shrine of Remembrance. These events all received media coverage (from the SBS channel and Melbourne's French-language *Petit Journal*).

B- A strong parliamentary relationship

In the past, the friendship group had welcomed many delegations at the Palais du Luxembourg, but had not visited Australia in the last six years. Thus, enjoyed a particularly warm reception from Canberra's Federal Parliament, as well as at the Parliament of Victoria in Melbourne, with a shared focus on common values.

In Canberra the delegation had an audience with President of the Australian Senate Mr Stephen Parry, during which President Daunis thanked him for representing Australia at the 11 January Paris Unity Rally protesting against the terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the kosher supermarket l'Hyper Cacher.

Mr Parry and his counterpart in the lower house, Mr Tony Smith, then held a dinner at the Parliament in honour of the delegation. A dozen parliamentarians, of all political persuasions but all sharing a strong commitment to France, were invited. This meeting was an opportunity to address many current issues of both a political and economic nature.



The delegation with Mr Stephen Parry, President of the Australian Senate, Mr. Christophe Lecourtier, French Ambassador, and Mr Cédric Prieto, First Counsellor

The delegation was also invited to a working breakfast with the Australian Parliament's Australia-France friendship group presided by Mr Sean Edwards, Senator for South Australia.

In Melbourne, the delegation was jointly received in the State of Victoria Parliament by the Presidents of the lower and upper house, respectively, Mr Telmo Languiller and Mr Bruce Atkinson.

In the course of the discussions, the members of the friendship group delegation issued an invitation to their Australian counterparts to come to France in 2016 and take part in the next WW1 commemoration ceremonies (ANZAC day in April, Pozières and Battle of the Somme in July).

II. Promising prospects

The delegation noticed positive dynamics at work on every level, founded on France's many – and often under-estimated – assets within Australia.

A- A vibrant french community

Firstly, France has around 100,000 of its citizens living in Australia, a community that's generally quite young and rising steadily. This population has increased by 10% since 2001 and according to on-site polls, both professional opportunities (career, salary, etc.) and quality of life were cited as reasons for choosing their expat status.

The delegation was able to meet with many representatives of the French community, including consular advisers and French nationals who have been settled in Australia for a long time and many of whom have dual nationality. They all stressed the very positive mindset of the country, which makes it a particularly attractive place to live.

There is also a strong trend for young French people to move here temporarily in order to broaden their experience or get further training – even though as students they pay twice as much in tuition as locals. Young French nationals with working holiday visas are typically very sought-after by local employers, because of their willingness and good general education.

B- High-level scientific and cultural cooperation

The French scientific community has around 500 members, mainly active in very high-tech sectors such as medical and pharmaceutical research or transport engineering, and these professionals are beginning to coalesce into a network that offers great opportunities, both **to showcase our country and as a driver for future projects.**

In Sydney the delegation visited the Universities of New South Wales and of Sydney, where they were particularly interested in the Charles Perkins Centre that conducts leading-edge research into obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. French scientists are very highly regarded within the Australian research establishment, as was illustrated by the distinguished posts held by the researchers who received the delegation (Head of Research Team, Laboratory Director, Institute Director, Dean of Research, etc.).

Prof. Cyrille Boyer of the University of New South Wales – winner of a prestigious Australian Prime Minister's Science Prize in October 2015 – is an exemplary case. The remarkable work carried out by Prof. Kondo-François Aguey-Zinsou's team on the hydrogen fuel cell offers another outstanding example.

In Canberra, the delegation attended a lunch with leading figures from the French-speaking cultural community such as Alliance Française directors, organisers of French festivals in Australia, academics and researchers. The latter presented many of the Universities' ongoing projects, including an innovative travelling library-bus. Exchanges among guests served to highlight the success of the festivals that have been organised, especially around Brisbane on the Gold Coast, and academic research in the social sciences.



Leading figures from Canberra's cultural community and the delegation in front of the French-language library-bus

In Melbourne, the delegation met some equally outstanding French researchers in the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute – one of Australia's most prestigious medical research institutes. Discussions included the question of how to encourage France's post-graduates to return to their homeland after a stint abroad. A cultural visit followed, as the delegation called at St Kilda's Alliance Française, directed by Mr Michel Richard and widely recognised for the quality of its programming.

C- Economic opportunities

The issue of the French proposal for replacement of the Collins submarines was broached, specifically during interparliamentary discussions. Despite stiff competition from Germany and Japan, the French proposal is unequivocally in line with the Franco-Australian strategic partnership agreement signed in January 2012 and benefits from government support.

Mr Philip Dalidakis, Minister for SMEs, Innovation and Trade, met with the delegation in Melbourne for very positive discussions.

The delegation visited the headquarters of Yarra Trams run by Keolis, the world's biggest tram network operator. A meeting with Managing Director Mr Clément Michel covered a wide range of topics, including infrastructure financing models, the constraints of out-of-date networks, the consequences of free travel in the city centre, relations with French suppliers and how to reinforce them, internal labour relations, and relations with Australian political authorities.

A visit to the GDF-Suez Australia premises enabled the delegation to learn about how the electricity market functions here and to hear about Australia's approach to energy transition, shifting from a fossil fuel economy to one based on renewable energies.

At the French Consulate in Melbourne, the delegation met to discuss Australia's employment law with an academic and a lawyer specialised in the subject, a French businessman, an entrepreneur and the young president of an association that advises holders of holiday working visas. The meeting provided an opportunity to grasp the specificities of Australian employment rights, which are considered to give the labour market more flexibility than the French system.

The delegation also spent time with a new organisation called Team France that brings together the Ambassador and all the bodies that back French businesses (Business France, CCEF, Franco-Australian Chamber of Commerce), and will henceforth be in a position to give our businesses an additional boost. It was agreed that Team France and the friendship group will engage in a continuing dialogue over the long term to support future initiatives.

D- A marked shift on climate issues

Naturally the delegation asked about Australia's position on COP21. The Australian economy remains deeply dependent on coal, which accounted for 61% of electricity production and 32% of energy consumption in 2013-2014. Prime Minister Mr Tony Abbott, who had backing from the industrial and mining industries when he came to power in 2013, dealt a severe blow to the country's climate policy by repealing the Carbon Tax introduced by the Labour Party.

In Sydney, the delegation was met by Mr John O'Connor of the Climate Institute, a think tank that specialises in studying energy and environmental policies and enabling dialogue between the key players involved. Mr O'Connor set out the history of Australia's environmental policy and the delegation noted that since new Prime Minister Mr Malcolm Turnbull was appointed in September 2015, there has been a **positive shift in official policy**.



The delegation at Melbourne's Alliance Française with Director Mr Michel Richard and Honorary Consul Mrs Myriam Boisbouvier-Wyle (top left)

The delegation wishes to extend its particular thanks to His Excellence, Mr Christophe Lecourtier, Ambassador of France, Mrs Myriam Boisbouvier-Wyle, Honorary Consul in Melbourne and Mr Nicolas Croizier, General Consul in Sydney, for their help in organising this trip and ensuring its success. The delegation's packed programme enabled its members to understand both **the depth of the bilateral relationship and the strong interest that Australia has in France, given current economic and geopolitical circumstances**.

France – the only European nation present in the Pacific, and viewed there as an element of stability – is consolidating its high-tech image. France's exemplary cooperation with the Australian forces is much appreciated, as well as the contribution of French companies to Australia's economic development.

Given these conditions, the time seems ripe for a historic *rapprochement*.

Composition of the Delegation

			
Mr Marc Daunis President of the Group, Senator of Alpes-Maritimes (Socialist and Republican)	Mr Jean-Léonce Dupont, Vice-President, Senator of Calvados (UDI-UC)	Mrs Catherine Procaccia Vice-President, Senator of Val-de-Marne (Republicans)	Mr Didier Marie Senator of Seine-Maritime (Socialist and Republican)
Composition of the friendship group http://www.senat.fr/groupe-interparlementaire-amitie/ami_578.html			