



VICTOR MALLET

Interview conducted on 2 December 2019

Clare Gray: We are delighted to be joined by Victor Mallet, who is the Financial Times Bureau Chief based in Paris. Mr Mallet has an extensive career in journalism spanning over three decades I believe, with postings in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia.

Victor Mallet: That's right, yes.

Clare Gray: So, a wealth of experience to draw on today!

Victor Mallet: Thank you.

Clare Gray: You're very welcome to Dublin and we look forward to hearing your views on the future of Europe and, indeed, the role of France in this debate. I might start with a broad question. The new institutions are now in office in Brussels, marking the start of the new legislative term. What areas do you think France will look to prioritise in the next five years?

Victor Mallet: I think France, and what it really wants to do with Europe, what President Emmanuel Macron wants to do with Europe, is to keep the European Union very focused on its role as a potential superpower, particularly **an economic superpower** because of the strategic and trade confrontations that the EU faces, particularly with the US and China. So, I think the French vision is of a bloc that is not completely united, obviously, but has a **very strong common voice on issues, particularly of trade, strategy, defence and security**. Everything else that they talk about centres around that, whether it's defence policy or strengthening the Eurozone and so on. So, all those things are part of that vision that Macron has, and he is quite a strategic thinker, he does tend to think big thoughts about what he wants Europe to do. In 2017, just after he was elected, he came up, with a very long list of common European projects in a whole bunch of areas including **migration, the economy, defence** and so on.

Clare Gray: Just touching there on migration, this is something on which President Macron has adopted an increasingly tough stance. Do you think it's conceivable that he will be able to forge some kind of consensus on a common asylum migration policy over the next five years?

Victor Mallet: In Europe, I think the answer is yes, because it's **not only him, rather all the European Governments have realised that this is not quite as easy** as they had thought. I remember Angela Merkel famously invited in 1 million people from Syria and the Middle East and basically it turned out to be something that was not going to work that easily. So, Macron, on the one hand, is part of a group of liberals, **social liberals** if you like, who have come around to the idea that **you do actually need to control immigration** much more than it's being controlled currently. France has a particular problem in that it is the destination for a lot of asylum seekers, so it does have quite a large flow of people who are either illegal or haven't yet been granted asylum and may not be granted asylum because they come from places where they're not necessarily being persecuted. **There is a domestic political agenda** as well, which is that he's **competing against the extreme right**, the Rassemblement National and Marine le Pen, and her big thing is immigration and how it should be stopped and controlled, so Macron is leaning more towards that direction. Now, that doesn't mean he has abandoned all his liberal ideas, but for the last year or so he has been talking much more about controlling migration, and that translates into his approach to European policy, which is now a little bit more in line than it was with some of, for example, the Eastern European countries.

Clare Gray: Regarding Macron's approach to European policy, he has been referred to recently as a bit of a disruptor. Can you tell us a little bit about his approach to diplomacy and how you think it fits in with the traditional consensus-based decision-making in the EU?

Victor Mallet: He is a **self-confessed disruptor in diplomacy**. He talks about audacity or boldness in policy, that's what he does. So, when he makes these quite strong statements about NATO suffering from brain-death, it's quite a deliberate policy. What he and his advisors say he's trying to do is to essentially shake up people from their complacency. He says it's hypocritical and foolish just to sit there and pretend that NATO is okay when it's not. So, his argument would be 'we're being rational.' But he definitely **has an approach that is not always consensual**, and he is much criticised, for example, by the Germans and by Angela Merkel, for not consulting with his allies when he goes out on a limb and starts talking to Russia, for example, or running a peace initiative between the Iranians and the Americans. What the **other Europeans want is more consultation**, and they don't necessarily disagree with his analysis of the problem. In the case of NATO, there is obviously a strategic problem when you have two of the countries doing things on their own - Turkey and the US - for example with what happened in Syria where Turkey went into Syria and the Americans let them go. There was no consultation with other NATO members. So, Macron's approach is to be quite forthright about the problems, and his failing, if you look at it from the point of view of the Poles or the Germans, is not to consult enough with his European allies when he says the things that need to be said.

Clare Gray: So, it remains to be seen how successful he is going to be in getting some of his key proposals across the line?

Victor Mallet: I think that's true. It is a work in progress, obviously the European Union in particular is always changing. We have this massive change coming up, probably, which is **Brexit, which is going to completely disrupt the way Europe functions, the way its diplomacy works and relations between the big powers in Europe are going to fundamentally change**. France is quite well-positioned, with Macron's candidates if you like, or candidates that he at least approves of in the Commission, in the European Central Bank and the Council. He has done quite well in pushing to have **people that are France-friendly, if you like, in the Commission and the other institutions in the EU**.

Clare Gray: Victor, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us, it's been really fascinating.

Victor Mallet: Thank you.