

The epic political elegance of Emmanuel Macron



French President Emmanuel Macron's recent visit to the UK was closely followed by the British press, with his comments on Brexit and Donald Trump generating a large number of headlines. [George Kassimeris](#) writes that Macron's visit underlined his credentials as a transformative political leader. And with Angela Merkel's authority damaged by the results of last year's German federal election, Macron is in the right place at the right time to take over the reins of European leadership.

For once the journalistic superlatives were warranted. 'Emmanuel Macron's Andrew Marr Interview Has People Swooning' ran the HuffPost's Sunday headline. Macron, tweeted the New Statesman's editor, Jason Cowley, 'has so quickly become Europe's most interesting politician'. 'Without going all fanboy, Macron is a class act. If only British politics could throw up someone similar' lamented the FT's political writer, Sebastian Payne. Even the Sun's usually cynical political editor succumbed in saying: 'Think what you like about Macron, but by God he answers a straight question. Our obfuscating politicians need to learn how to do that and fast'.

Macron's mesmerizingly elegant performance on the BBC's flagship Sunday political show, where he openly and ultra-confidently discussed (in fluent English) a wide-range of issues from Europe and Brexit to his relationship with Donald Trump, was the final act of his visit to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, a military establishment outside London, for last week's UK-French summit meeting with Theresa May.

Calling, with unbearable political elegance, a spade a spade, President Macron told his TV host among other things what he no doubt also told the British PM at Sandhurst; namely that the UK would not be able to get full access to the Single Market without paying in money and accepting freedom of movement on Brexit. Macron also hit the nail on the head about the reasons behind the Brexit vote. The obvious point he was making was: If you ask unhappy people a straight yes or no question whether they want things to stay the same, that's what you get. It was an epic performance from which the British prime minister has several lessons to learn from. Macron is open, confident, warm, optimistic and enjoys big ideas and concepts. And he is lucky.

Napoleon once remarked that he would rather have a general who was lucky than one who was good. Macron seems, judging from his political campaign and stunning victory for the French Presidency, to possess both qualities. This is someone, let me remind you, who at the age of 39 has only ran for political office once in his life, that of the President of the French Republic, and he won it with a landslide.



Emmanuel Macron, Credit: [vfutscher](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Macron sees himself as a transformative leader. In his first official visit abroad as head of the French Republic, which took place in Athens last September, he gave a speech on the re-founding of European sovereignty, in front of the Acropolis, the birthplace of democracy. Macron, it has become clear by now, prizes symbolic historic settings for his speeches in the tradition of Francois Mitterand and Charles de Gaulle.

I was privileged to have witnessed that speech on the Pnyx, the hill in front of the Acropolis where in ancient times the assembly of Athenians raised their hands to vote on the city's laws and budget. Macron used his Athens speech to position himself as the leader who can fix Europe's crisis of confidence. He called for greater European Union cooperation and solidarity, reiterating his longstanding calls for an integrated eurozone with its own financial minister, parliament and a standalone budget to head off future crises. He further argued that in an age of weakening political loyalties nations sticking together inside the EU was the only way to protect citizens against problems ranging from climate change to terrorism. It was a deeply evocative speech full of historical meaning and symbolism that captured the *Zeitgeist*.

This is Emmanuel Macron's European moment. And the French president knows it. Given Angela Merkel's poor showing in Germany's general election, which left her politically weakened and preoccupied with constructing a new viable coalition (if that ever actually happens), Macron finds himself in the right place at the right time to take over the reins of European leadership. For Europe also, the timing could not have been better. Macron's ambition and passionate Europeanism are to bring a fresh and much-needed sense of purpose into the whole European project at a time when crises such as Brexit and Catalan separatism could have gravely threatened it.

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