

French executives explain why France has 'les bleus'

David Gow in Brussels
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As England's gaffe-prone rugby team gingerly prepares to prevent France winning at Twickenham for the first time in eight years tomorrow, a group of French executives have thrown in the towel: the British system is better by far.

Andy Robinson, the England rugby coach, is calling for a 20% improvement on last weekend's sorry display against Wales when they play les Bleus - the kind of improved economic performance the French executives want from their 60 million fellow citizens.

The 15 executives, who are based in Britain and are advisers to France's external trade service, have written a report, "French under-employment, British full employment: a barely cordial paradox". Its aim is to show France how it can "be inspired by good UK practices to win the battle for jobs and attractiveness."

According to yesterday's Le Monde newspaper, the executives start from the sad evidence that, 20 years ago, the UK was poorer than France but now British GDP per head is 6% higher. France had lower unemployment but joblessness is now twice as high (9.8% to Britain's 4.7%).

The report argues that, while France enjoys the unparalleled "hardware" bonus of a unique geographical position, top-rank infrastructure, high-performing health and education systems and a qualified workforce, les rosbifs are better at "software" such as behaviour and creating the right economic and cultural environment.

So, while France spends five times as much on job creation, it is proud of making redundancy more difficult than elsewhere when its priority should be to make finding work easier. Where the Brits see unemployment "as part of the cycle of creative destruction" and can set up a firm to escape it in 48 hours, the French turn up late, work fewer hours (40.7 to 43.8 a week) and retire earlier (at 58.8 years to Britain's 62.3).

The executives, who want to "de-dramatise" sackings and make them easier in France, point out that full employment is good for those in work because it enables them to demand higher pay in a tight labour market.

By way of belated riposte the French economy, which stagnated in the third quarter of last year, returned to life in the fourth, showing as much as 0.8% growth, new figures showed, pointing to a surge in consumer spending. England will clearly be out to spoil their fun tomorrow.