

NOT A PANACEA: ATTITUDES TO FRENCH CITIZENSHIP AMONGST BRITISH PEOPLE IN FRANCE

Introduction

Applying for citizenship of one's host EU27 country has often been put forward as a solution to a potential loss of citizens' rights following the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Recent news reports suggest that applications for naturalisation by British people across the EU27 have surged since the Brexit referendum: in France, for example, there were three times as many applications in 2016 than 2015.

But things aren't as simple as that. For a start, acquiring citizenship doesn't automatically compensate for the loss of the complex bundle of interlinked rights that come with EU citizenship and allow us to live in another EU country. While citizenship brings with it a right to residence, to work and to move freely across the EU, it doesn't help, for example, to preserve current reciprocal health care, pension or other social security rights with the UK (which will become a Third Country after Brexit) or indeed the mutual recognition of professional qualifications.

But it's more complex even than that. Acquiring citizenship of another country is more than just an administrative procedure - it involves our whole belief system and sense of identity: as such is an emotional, philosophical and ethical decision, not just a pragmatic one. And that complicates the issue for many.

What do British citizens living in France feel about applying for citizenship?

18 months on from the referendum, I wanted to explore the thoughts, feelings and attitudes of some of the British citizens living in France to applying for French citizenship. During January 2018 I conducted some informal research with members of the group 'RIFT – Remain in France Together'.

The group was set up in June 2016 to represent the interests of British people in France as the UK moved towards Brexit – in particular focusing on the protection of citizens' rights. The group has 6600 members from all over France and of all ages from 19 to over 90, although the largest proportion falls into the age range 45 to 64. Two-thirds of the members are female. RIFT is also a core member group of the coalition British in Europe. I am a coordinator of RIFT and a member of the steering committee of British in Europe; I'm well known amongst group members, and this clearly encouraged people to take part.

Altogether 1341 people (20% of the total membership) chose to participate in the project, which took place via the medium of RIFT's very active Facebook group – a closed group,

visible only to its members, so regarded as a 'safe place'. Members were asked to respond to an online survey, and then qualify their answers by means of comments. Some people also responded to me privately.

Applying for naturalisation in France

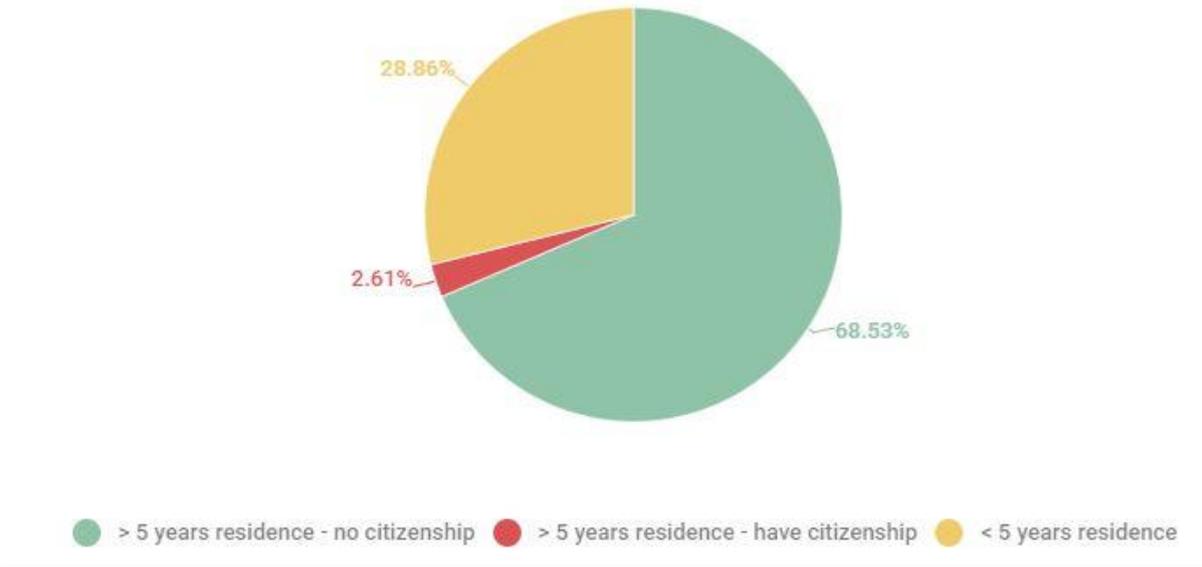
Naturalisation – obtaining French citizenship by decree, as opposed to by declaration (conferred via marriage, birth or in certain other restricted cases) – is regarded by the state as an honour: a legal favour, not a right or an administrative procedure. It's a long and trying process – up to 2 years, and rarely less than 18 months – which tests the degree to which applicants' lifestyles fit in with the norms of French society and requires the compilation of a complex dossier of documents that begins with parents' birth and marriage certificates and effectively goes on to cover every period of an applicant's life. Official documents need to be translated by a sworn translator, which can bring costs up to 700 euros or more.

Applicants normally need 5 years residence to be eligible. All applicants are interviewed at a regional centre, which can involve journeys of 3 hours or more each way for many. Those under 60 need to produce a French language diploma at Level B1; those over 60 aren't required to produce a diploma, but they're expected to speak French to the same level and this is tested at interview. Applicants are subject to a criminality check and will also be visited at home by gendarmes, usually unannounced.

The interview – which takes up to 90 minutes – sets out to verify that the applicant is 'assimilated' into French society, that they accept and live by fundamental Republican principles, understand and accept the rights and duties conferred by the status of French nationality and have a working knowledge of French history, geography, politics, literature, famous people, art and sport. As well as demonstrating their knowledge of these subjects, applicants are asked about their day to day life: their social life and 'vie associative', which language they speak at home and at work, how often they return to their birth country. The expectation is that they will demonstrate their 'worthiness' to become French.

Although an extensive network for mutual aid and support has developed amongst British applicants for naturalisation in France, it is regarded as a difficult, stressful and sometimes traumatic procedure.

The survey participants

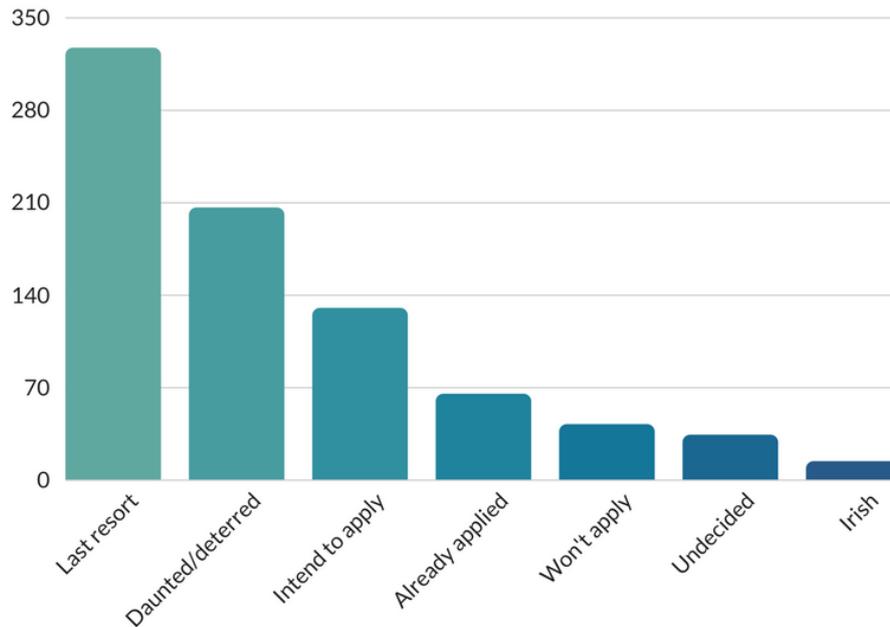


Of the 1341 people who responded to the initial survey, 35 have already obtained French citizenship, 387 have lived in France for less than 5 years and therefore are not yet eligible to apply, and the remaining 919 have permanent residence status (> 5 years) but have not yet obtained citizenship. It is this latter group that I chose to investigate further; 818 of them took part in a second survey.

The results

Two groups – the *'last resorters'* and the *'daunted/deterred'* together add up to a rather startling 65% of the total number of respondents. I'll talk about – and quote – some of their responses in more detail below as they make some very strong points about their reluctance to 'become French' or to go through the naturalisation process.

Almost 8% have already applied and are waiting either for their assimilation interview or for the result, while just over 15% intend to start the application process before Brexit. A small number (5%) don't intend to apply at all, while a similar number (4%) remain undecided. The smallest group are those who intend to take up their rights to an Irish passport, included in the study as they demonstrate the over-riding importance for so many of remaining European.



The 'last resorters'

327 respondents – 40% of the total and the largest single group – would consider applying for naturalisation only as a last resort. For most, this means only if negotiations between the UK and EU were to break down without a citizens' rights deal; it remains unclear exactly what status Britons in Europe would have if that were to happen and for the 'last resorters' applying to become French would be an option only if it were the sole means of securing residence and employment rights.

So why do so many people – some of who have lived in France for decades – consider naturalisation to be a last ditch option? A number of themes recur in their commentaries.

Hypocrisy is mentioned frequently, with many people believing it to be hypocritical to apply for citizenship simply as an act of expediency or for purely pragmatic reasons.

"As I would not have applied for French citizenship before the threat of Brexit, it seems hypocritical to do so now when the main reason would be for my personal convenience."

"I would feel a hypocrite applying for French citizenship although I would meet the criteria. I am British and while I can't see myself returning to the UK, I am not and never will be French. I spent the first 55 years of my life living in the UK and I can't change my cultural background. I love my life here and don't feel at home any more in the UK but I am not French."

"I would ONLY apply as a last resort - where it becomes the only means of staying with any real degree of rights that approach what we have now. I don't for one moment think things will get to

that point, but if they do I'd feel that I had no choice. And I would do it with a heavy heart because I would feel like a prize hypocrite. But I'd do it."

Some people express **resentment** that they could be forced into a situation where they feel they have to consider naturalisation due to outside factors rather than as a considered personal choice.

"After 13 years, if push comes to shove, I'll probably have to apply for French or Irish nationality (if they'll have me). But I deeply resent being forced into this corner and the expense that it will entail. I don't have any lingering sentimental attachment to British nationality as I've seen how easily they're prepared to abandon me. Brexit certainly takes you to places where you never expected to go."

"I don't see why I should be forced to do something because of the actions of a government I did not vote for nor a referendum which I was excluded from voting in (15 year rule.) Applying for French citizenship denies who I am."

"I chat well enough, watch TV, read (and occasionally dream) in French, albeit still heavily accented and grammatically less than parfait. BUT I settled here as a European-British citizen, and never harboured any profound aspirations or pretensions to become "a Frenchman". I object to being obliged to adopt another nationality as a purely administrative "flag of convenience" exercise, just to preserve rights I shouldn't be losing in the first place. I [also] object to being obliged - by Brexit supporting voters in the UK, and by the failure of the UK Government negotiating team to safeguard my interests - to embark on a time-consuming, potentially costly paper chase which has no guaranteed outcome when I already have more than enough paperwork to do in France, just to stand still!"

A primary thread that runs through the responses of the 'last resorters' is connected to **identity**: many people identify not as French but as European. Some specifically identify as, and value being, 'British-European'. Others struggle with any concept of one-state nationality. Much of the anger and resentment about the future loss of EU citizenship (and the potential need to apply for French citizenship) stems from this deep-seated and core sense of self and the fear of its loss.

"I moved to France as a UK & European Citizen and not to become French."

"Nationality is an odd concept to me. You have the nationality of where you were born and nothing can change that or your feelings towards your birthplace but I have no 'patriotic' feelings about GB (especially now!) and don't really have any towards France (although I want to continue living here as this is where my present life is - who knows for the future?). What I really prize is my European citizenship but, sadly, that is the one that is most at risk."

"I am not French - I'm English, British and European. I'll never be French. It feels a bit cheeky to apply, but I will as a last resort."

"I'm not comfortable with the idea of citizenship (of any one country) or of pledging allegiance to a nation state. I am, and am happy to be, European."

“I never planned to become French, any more than I ‘planned’ to be British. As the debate unfolds, I realise that national affiliation doesn't matter to me. Never had a reason to think about this before.”

“I ticked last resort; I'm happy to be British, but equally we moved here 10 years ago as British/EU citizens. I don't see why we should lose those rights. I'd be happy to pay a small amount to remain an EU citizen but I don't consider myself French.”

“I don't want to apply for citizenship - I have some deep-seated beliefs about nationality and while I can just about accept having to have one by birth, I truly don't want to apply for one and 'pledge' myself to one country. I would feel very uncomfortable about that and at the same time have no wish to apply for citizenship simply on pragmatic grounds. That feels unethical. I'd find it very difficult to do all the allegiance stuff because I would know that I was being hypocritical, and I myself would see no reason why the French state should accept me as a citizen.”

The ‘daunted-deterred’

A significant number of respondents – 206 respondents representing 25.2% of the total - would be willing to apply for French citizenship but feel daunted by the process or deterred by a specific aspect of it.

For some, **health** is a major issue, especially when an application would involve a long journey to the regional centre.

“It's ill health that's stopping us applying. Cannot do the trek to Bordeaux for the interview.”

“I want to apply for citizenship but have not done it yet for personal reasons. I'm deeply, seriously claustrophobic and suffer from anxiety and panic attacks, so the idea of the exams and interviews are what is stopping me - put me in a room with a closed door and I generally have a meltdown (can't use lifts, don't use trains or planes, etc). Am looking into whether I can take the DELF exam online, as I test at B2/C1 when I do the online tests - it's not the language itself that bothers me, just getting through the face-to-face stuff.”

Many people cite the time, difficulty and expense of putting together all the **paperwork** required for their application.

“I'll tell you why I haven't applied. First of all I am 80, so wonder if it would be worth it. However, the main reason is the paperwork. I spent months in tears, trying to get our paper work sorted for a carte de séjour, and the thought of having to dig out paperwork going back to my grandparents, one set of whom I never knew, fills me with dread. I can't spend what time I have left, dealing with all this. It's just too much. I speak French, we are integrated and provided we are allowed to stay I really don't see the need, much as in theory I would love to.”

“Been here since 1987, paid taxes, work and pay all social charges too, good French speaker, am involved in many associations and was elected on to local council, but am put off by all the paperwork and time to get French nationality.”

Some respondents don't feel confident about their **language skills**. For those under 60 who are required to hold a diploma or take a test, this is often less about their ability to understand and communicate in French than about the fear of being examined (and hence of failure). For those who have arrived in France on retirement, it's often about the ability to succeed at a long interview discussing subjects that may be abstract and unfamiliar; some arrived with only basic French language skills and feel that they would struggle to reach Level B1.

"I am hoping that I don't need to apply for French citizenship my French skills are adequate for day to day life but not sure they would be good enough for the interview! I am over 60 though so that would make it easier."

"The only thing stopping us 2 (we are over 65) is the language problem. Even though we are aware we would not have to sit an exam we would not get through an interview. Even though we are in the company of French people 85% of the time they love to speak English as they can't understand our French, we have no chance of a coming out well with an interview."

Others simply view the **entire process** as frightening.

"We would love to go for French citizenship but the process frightens us, me in particular. I would be so nervous at the interview that I just know I would fail even though my French (although not fluent) is not bad. Also, all the paperwork work needed to apply, language qualification certificate, official papers all needing translation from English, trying to get paperwork from parents, etc, etc. The whole process gives me a feeling of dread."

Other things that respondents cite as being deterrents include:

- Fear that the British government could financially penalise them for taking French citizenship;
- Concern that they may not meet the financial requirements for citizenship (this mainly relates to economically active people who are required to demonstrate 'sufficient and stable resources');
- Fear of failure;
- Difficulty in and length of time required to obtain an appointment for an assimilation interview. Each regional centre has different procedures, but this is cited most frequently by those whose regional centre is Toulouse, where applicants are required to book an appointment online for the interview, at which they present their dossier. Some people have been trying to get an appointment for over 12 months;
- Concern that putting themselves through a long, complicated and stressful procedure may not, ironically, protect all the rights that they currently enjoy as EU citizens of one country who have exercised freedom of movement in another.

Conclusions

In a recent lobby by members of British in Europe groups of MEPs, a French MEP – Isabelle Thomas – wrote this to correspondents: [I have translated from French] “Unfortunately, at this moment I see no alternative other than to apply for naturalisation in a Member state. Perhaps the negotiation conditions will maintain the possibility of dual nationality which would allow you to keep your original nationality if you so wish”.

While this was a small survey, its conclusion is salutary for those, like Mme Thomas, who suggest that obtaining French citizenship is a straightforward solution to a potential loss of rights as a result of Brexit. Put simply, for a majority of people, citizenship is neither straightforward nor even, necessarily, a solution.

To suggest that it ignores the importance of both identity and conscience in the decision whether to apply for citizenship. If the results are in any way representative, many British residents of France are not enthusiastic about naturalisation. They consider themselves European, or British-European, rather than French and are uncomfortable about feeling pushed into applying for citizenship simply as an act of expediency. As one respondent puts it “French nationality should be something that you earnestly desire, and should be an honour, rather than merely a shabby bolt-hole to hide from Brexit’s consequences”.

It also under-estimates the level of commitment and the difficulty, time, expense and stress involved in the process of applying for French citizenship – a process that many people find daunting, many to the point of feeling unable to embark on it. Not only that, but some people may simply not be able to meet the criteria: for example those with health issues, who have learning or cognitive disabilities or who just don't have the kind of mind that learns languages easily, and those who don't meet the requirements for ‘sufficient and stable resources’. While we continue to be told that taking French citizenship is an option if our rights are not upheld post-Brexit, it is not an option available to everyone under current rules.

As one participant puts it: “It’s 18 months out of my life that I shouldn’t have to lose. It’s expensive. It’s stressful. It’s not what I would have chosen. And at the end of it all I could still end up with less rights than I’ve got now. It’s not a panacea.”

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RIFT – Remain in France Together and British in Europe
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