

LE NOUVEL OBS – April 29, 2009

Funny Business at the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi

A lobbyist close to Olivier Dassault, **Pascal Renouard de Vallière**, structured the deal to create the Paris-4 Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), signed by Gilles de Robien, then Minister for National Education, in 2006. For this deal, which he says took two years of work, he had negotiated a **\$2 million commission** that was to be paid by the Emirates. But he never saw any of it. He believes the **Quay d’Orsay** is opposing it. But the plot thickens even further: to justify these fees, the protocol for the creation of the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi, written in English, includes an **exclusivity clause** for “the Sorbonne University” that covers the Middle East.



Signing ceremony for the creation of the Paris-4 Sorbonne University in Abu Dhabi on February 19, 2006. Center: Gilles de Robien, then Minister for National Education. To the extreme left, Pascal Renouard de Vallière.

A problem: in addition to the Paris-4 “Paris Sorbonne” University, two other universities also bear the Sorbonne name: Paris-1 “Panthéon Sorbonne” and “Paris-3 “Sorbonne Nouvelle”. They can therefore not enter into any educational partnership in the Middle East. **Paris-1 rejects this interpretation and has decided to question the legality of the agreement signed by Paris-4.** Yet another problem: the content of the protocol for this agreement has been kept confidential until now. In any event, this affair has already caused a diplomatic incident with Bahrain, who was refused an educational partnership with Paris-1 for reasons of “higher interests”. With Nicolas Sarkozy about to inaugurate the **French military base in Abu Dhabi** at the end of May, did the granting of exclusivity for the “Sorbonne” name to the United Arab Emirates facilitate the signing of agreements with this country? Here is the story of this murky affair.

The Magic of the “Sorbonne” Name

Until very recently, only France was unaware that the name “Sorbonne”, like “Louvre” or “Dior”, is magic for the entire planet. Indeed, three Emirates are fighting to benefit from this prestigious name. But the matter has turned into an imbroglio and has led to a diplomatic incident, because no one knows who legally owns the Sorbonne name. Historically, after the events of May of ’68, a few

technocrats divvied up the Sorbonne (as it had been the center for uncontrollable agitation) into three different universities called Paris-1 (the former Faculty of Law and Economics), Paris 3 (the former Faculty of Letters) and Paris 4 (also a former Faculty of Letters). This was tantamount to renaming Chanel or Renault. In fact, these universities rapidly sought to retrieve their heritage, which resulted in a tortuous compromise. The Faculty of Letters, Paris 4, which occupies the historic building on the Boulevard Saint Michel, inherited the “**Paris Sorbonne**” title. The Faculty of Law and Economics, located in the adjacent building at the foot of the Panthéon, also prestigious, only inherited the “**Panthéon Sorbonne**” title, but has the privilege of being called Paris-1. This is important, as an Asian delegation recently mistook Paris 6 for the sixth faculty in Paris, although it ranks first in Shanghai’s Classification under the name “Université Pierre et Marie Curie”. Finally, the “**Sorbonne Nouvelle**”, alias Paris 3, is housed on shabby prefabricated premises referred to as “Censier”.

In this context, in 2003, the right-wing mover and shaker, **Jean-Robert Pitte**, took over as President of Paris 4. Without consulting the other faculties, he decided to promote the Sorbonne name and granted a “multi-product” license to an outside operator. As long as he was to sell clothing signed by Christian Lacroix and coffee cups, his rivals in Paris 1 and Paris 3 were happy to remain silent. “We are not usurping the Sorbonne name,” Pitte said at the time. “The Sorbonne is a building and Paris 4 bears its name.”

Complications started on February 19, 2006 when Pitte, along with Gilles de Robien, then Minister for National Education, signed an “implementation agreement” for “the University of Sorbonne at Abu Dhabi” **in the presence of Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed, Associate Chief of the Emirati Armed Forces**, and Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister for Higher Education and Scientific Research in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This agreement states that Paris 4 will be paid 15% of the registration fees of \$13,000 per year. Three amphitheatres and 45 classrooms, as well as a 50,000 volume library are planned. Pitte explains that there is no way Paris 1 and Paris 3 will be involved in the operation. “It would be too complicated administratively.” The university opened in 2006 and welcomed 170 students. Future enrolment of 2,000 is forecasted (400 students are currently enrolled), which represents approximately €2 million for Paris 4: about half of the proceeds from the 25,000 students enrolled in Paris. “The Sorbonne name is a gold mine,” says Pitte.

The Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi: an Exclusive, Secret Agreement

This matter irritated his colleague and close neighbor, **Pierre-Yves Hénin**, President of Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne at the time, to such a degree that Mr. Hénin sought to determine the exact content of the agreement signed with Abu Dhabi to see what could prevent his “Panthéon Sorbonne” from doing the same. Despite all requests to the Quai d’Orsay, he was unable to get a copy of the contract. Not surprising. Here’s why: when **Pitte** paid for his media overexposure in mid-May 2008 and lost his presidency of Paris 4, his successor, the discreet but pugnacious **Georges Molinié**, Professor of French Stylistics, strongly opposed to the Pécresse Law, did not question Pitte’s signature. But he discovered, and publicly stated, that the implementation protocol was a “**secret agreement**”, which Pitte denies, but which is confirmed by **Michel Fichant**, a member of the Board of Directors of the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi and Professor of History of Philosophy at Paris 4. Molinié was also surprised that the annex referred to in the protocol (written in English) is called “The Sorbonne” and not “Paris 4”. Finally, he confirmed the presence of an **exclusivity clause for the “Middle East region”**.

This means that the two other faculties that bear the Sorbonne name are unable to enter in cooperative agreements with this very broad region extending from Dubai to Cairo and including Bayreuth and Teheran. **Pitte** rejects this interpretation. “This clause only relates to Paris 4. I would be happy to see my colleagues from Paris 1 or Paris 3 do the same.” But this is double-speak. Although he says, “A university that is called ‘Paris Sorbonne’, the head office of which is located in the Sorbonne building under the shadows of Richelieu’s Chapel, is very simply the Sorbonne and any statement to the

contrary is meaningless”, the geography professor also says, “It is obvious that Paris-Sorbonne is not the entire Sorbonne.”

Hénin presides over a university that is famous in particular for law and economics and that is seeking to enter into partnerships with other countries. At the time, he detected in this subtle nuance between “The Sorbonne” and “Paris 4” an obvious source of legal confusion. His fears were soon confirmed. As soon as **Sarkozy** was elected, he sought a meeting to clarify the matter. He says that he was told, “Ah, remnants of Chirac. We’ll take care of it. Don’t worry.” Two months later, the tone changed and all recourse was denied. Headstrong, he met twice with **Bernard Kouchner’s** cabinet and twice with **Pécresse’s**. He was welcomed only by embarrassed underlings who in essence told him to be quiet and they would find a solution.

Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne prohibited from any Partnership with Qatar

In November 2007, the French Embassy in Qatar informed Hénin that the **Prosecutor General of Qatar, Ali Bin Fetais Al-Marri**, who is a graduate of Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, wanted Paris 1 to create a law program in Doha. The proposal was attractive, as Qatar had created a Foundation for Education, with an endowment of more than **€ billion**, which had built a prestigious mega-campus, the “**Education City**”, to provide the best programs in the world. Six American universities are already present. Further to Nicolas Sarkozy’s visit to Qatar on January 14 and 15, 2008, Hénin urgently established a Law and International Affairs program. In parallel, Mr. Al-Marri directly confirmed his request to Hénin. To avoid any problem with Paris 4, Hénin informed Pitte of his project and sent a copy to the rector. He was then told that Paris 4 would issue the law diplomas in Abu Dhabi although, as a Faculty of Letters, it was not authorized to do so. To bypass this difficulty, he discovered **Pitte had entered into a subcontracting agreement with Paris 5** who has this accreditation ... but Paris 5 is not called the Sorbonne.

As a good lawyer, **Mr. Al-Marri** smelled a rat and sent an e-mail to Paris-1. “I want to know if you are legally authorized to sign the partnership we are requesting.” Hénin answered in strictly legal terms, “Yes, we are not Paris 4. We are therefore not bound by any exclusivity agreement.”

Invited to join the delegation that attended the Summit of Justice Ministers in Doha with **Rachida Dati** in April 2008, he left with a solid dossier on the implementation which had been prepared with the **APIE** (the agency for the State’s immaterial heritage) created by Thierry Breton to defend public trademarks. He left feeling confident based on an e-mail received from the Ministry for Higher Education that reads, “The Sorbonne name does not belong to Paris 4, so nothing stands in this way of this agreement.” In the plane, he nevertheless questioned Rachida Dati, “Does any doubt exist that could prevent the creation of Paris 1?” The good friend of the Prosecutor General of Qatar responded with enthusiasm, “No problem. I’ll take care of it. We’ll sign!” Once in Doha, Hénin still consulted various people, including **Bernard Belloc**, the university specialist for the Elysée Palace. A comical response, “You can sign it if you don’t use the word ‘implementation’ but ‘university collaboration’.” Less than a half an hour after arriving in Doha, **Dati** changed her mind. “Sorry. We’re no longer signing. The Elysée Palace has issued an absolute veto. For reasons of higher interests ...”

(photo)

Pierre-Yves Hénin, President of Paris-1 (to the right) in Doha in April 2008, beside Prosecutor General Al-Marri, the Principal of the Voltaire French Secondary School, and the Ambassador of Japan, Yukio Kitazmi. He came back to Paris without having signed the agreement with Qatar.

Hénin returned home confused. The Quai d’Orsay attempted to remedy the matter by proposing that the agreement be signed by “Paris-1 Panthéon” without using the word “Sorbonne”. This false

compromise was of no interest to Qatar. Then, at a meeting at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Hénin, shocked, discovered the Quai d'Orsay's most recent idea. "We'll make a proposal to Qatar under the Paris 1 Panthéon name, but the diplomas will be signed 'Paris-1 Panthéon Sorbonne'." For the time being, no response has been received, as the Qataris realize they are being led by the nose.

A Diplomatic Incident with Bahrain

At the end of 2008, the President of Paris-1, having barely recovered from the veto related to the implementation in Qatar, learned that **King Hamad Bin Eisa Al Khalifa** of Bahrain was interested in a partnership with Paris-1. Better yet, that it was an item on the agenda for the meeting between the King and **Nicolas Sarkozy** to be held on December 5, 2008. On December 6, "**The Gulf**" announced in its headlines, "After his visit to Nicolas Sarkozy, the King of Bahrain announced that he is welcoming an annex of the Sorbonne." This time, Hénin was sure of himself. A Russian delegation visiting Paris congratulated him. "So, you are going to Bahrain!" adding that the news had been announced by the **World Bank**. Hénin decided to send an e-mail to **Jean Daniel Levitte**, diplomatic attaché to the Elysée Palace, as he knew that Sarkozy was leaving for an official visit to Bahrain on February 11 and 12. On February 4, he was pleased to receive a personal letter on the King of Bahrain's letterhead inviting him to attend during Sarkozy's visit "in order to discuss opportunities to create an annex of the Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne University in Bahrain." He informed our Ambassador to Bahrain, who replied, "I can confirm the King's extremely positive reaction to the implementation project related to the Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne. My dearest desire is to see this project succeed." "**Implementation**": the magic word. "As a good citizen, I informed Sarkozy and asked him who I should discuss this with," says Hénin. No reply. On February 9, airline ticket in hand, he was told a problem had arisen. The Ambassador of France had completely changed his mind. "Your trip is raising an objection. I have informed the authorities in Bahrain." Hénin cancelled his trip, which was an insult to Bahrain. "One cannot refuse an invitation from the King." Hence, a **diplomatic incident**. On the 18th, **Bernard Kouchner** sent a long, embarrassed letter to Hénin. "We are bound by the Franco-Emirati agreement. It includes a clause that says that it will be the only annex of the Paris-Sorbonne University in the Near and Middle East. It therefore appears impossible to use this name again in this region. With regard to Bahrain, your project was not discussed when King Hamad met with Nicolas Sarkozy."

Enter An Angry Intermediary, Claiming € Million

But another issue also complicates this affair and makes it even murkier. Indeed, an important lobbyist, close to the Royal Families of the Middle East and a good friend of **Olivier Dassault, Pascal Renouard de Vallière**, was at the origin of the idea of a Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi, which he brought it to Pitte "on a silver platter", he says, after two years of work, which **Pitte** confirms, as do all the witnesses of the ceremony in Abu Dhabi. "He paid out of his pocket for the first on-site exploratory trip by Pitte and an associate, who were wary," a witness remembers. Renouard de Vallières, surprised by the fame attached to the Sorbonne name, even started working on a "**Sorbonne in Boston**" project at the time. This "advisor in international affairs" would be rewarded for his involvement on November 5, 2007 by being named a Chevalier of the Ordre National du Mérite in grand pomp in the **Sorbonne's grand amphitheater** by Olivier Dassault, "who played a very significant role in the matter," he says.

(photo)

November 5, 2007: Olivier Dassault (second from the right) in the grand amphitheater of the Sorbonne, decorated Pascal Renouard de Vallière (to his right) with the Ordre National du Mérite, in the present of Jean-Robert Pitte (to the right), former President of Paris-4

But moral recognition is not everything. In the **Al Ahram International newspaper** last February 4th, this **strange news item** appeared, published with Renouard de Vallière's agreement: "Pascal Renouard de Vallière is perplexed and surprised that no recognition, either moral or otherwise, has been attributed to him by decision-makers in Abu Dhabi, which is in total contradiction with the policy of the heirs of the late lamented Sheikh Zayed, to such a degree that he is truly astonished and can barely believe it. He is convinced that he is the victim of intrigues working against him."

Renouard de Vallière rejects the term "businessman" and says he is an "advisor in international relations". In fact, he is a lobbyist who uses the powerful relations in the Middle East he has nurtured for more than 20 years. He works for Dassault, among others. He requested €2 million for the structuring of the Sorbonne operations to be paid by Paris and Abu Dhabi. But as the Sorbonne doesn't have a cent, his idea was to include the exclusivity clause and request, in counterpart, that Abu Dhabi pay the €2 million. This was accepted ... but verbally. **The problem: the commission has never been paid.** Renouard de Vallière accuses the Quai d'Orsay as acting as an obstacle and, worse yet, seeking his bankruptcy as he now has a poor image in the Emirates. It is worth noting, however, that neither he nor Pitte had involved Foreign Affairs in the Abu Dhabi transaction ... Was this to justify his commission and avoid any short-circuiting?

In any event, de Vallière insinuates that **Patrice Paoli**, the former Ambassador to Abu Dhabi, now head of the Middle East at the Ministry, claims he fathered the Sorbonne operation, which was followed by the Louvre in Abu Dhabi project ... He only weakly rejects the notion that the Louvre operation had been inspired by him. These are very major interests, as the Louvre was "sold" for €700 million, including €70 million for the name alone and the rest in royalties (see below).

Renouard de Vallière, furious at having been set aside, is talking a lot and even inspired a small article in the **Figaro** on March 28th, with a bold title, "**Renouard de Vallière's Sorbonne**".

This jovial, imposing character (he is almost two meters tall), who likes to talk about his self-made career, incites various opinions due to his mysterious nature. Described as an adventurer or a wheeler-dealer, he has been the subject of more direct adjectives on the part of the **Quai d'Orsay**. He willingly acts naïve. However, business dealings in the Middle East over decades require solid stature. Having left for Saudi Arabia at the age of 19, he opened a business office in Riyadh in 1983, which he then transferred to Cairo in 1996. He speaks fluent Arabic and boasts about living like a Bedouin in tents. Moreover, as his web site attests, he has an impressive portfolio of relations, in particular politicians, with **Olivier Dassault** in the forefront. Allowing himself to be taken in on the Sorbonne project is intriguing; his version consists in saying that the affair is due to "disdain from the elite of French administration who wants to shun a self-made man." The argument seems superficial. Although he makes spelling mistakes, business facilitators like him, whether they are educated or not, with their great interpersonal skills, are always sought after in higher spheres.

One thing is certain in this whole matter. Only the Quai d'Orsay is giving weight to the exclusivity clause. "At Pécresse's ministry, on the contrary, they want more and more partnerships with foreign countries," explains an informer very close to the matter. "So there are interests other than education at stake here." The same informer notes that it is the same side of the reigning family in Abu Dhabi that controls the military interests and the Sorbonne project. Is the Elysée Palace defending the Abu Dhabi exclusivity to favor the future sale of arms and the upcoming inauguration of a French military base in this country at the end of May 2009? If this is the case, it would be an unusual way to promote the renown of a university.

Was the Sorbonne Name a Cheap Trade for Abu Dhabi?

At the end of April 2009, **Pierre-Yves Hénin**, whose mandate as President of Paris 1 expired, believes he is free to speak again. He is furious because a recent letter sent to **Bernard Kouchner** on March 13th requesting information on the Abu Dhabi contract has remained unanswered.

Hénin states, “I am making a precise, well-founded accusation: the ‘Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi’ is an agreement that includes an exclusivity clause in the opinion of the Quai d’Orsay, although this is not legally the case. If confidential matters exist, I want to know about them. If exclusivity exists in relation to the Sorbonne name, then royalties are to be paid. But if a commission exists that has not been paid, how does this affect the exclusivity? ... I want to be informed of the interests that are being protected in this matter?” And one of his Law Professors, **François Ameli**, a specialist in international contracts, is even more specific: “Nothing, absolutely nothing in law can oppose Paris-1 from establishing programs in the Middle East, as we have been requested to do by very high quality and visionary contacts such as Qatar.”

It is indeed strange that Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, an outstanding university in law and economics (with the IAE of Paris) is prohibited from creating partnerships in the Middle East because Paris 4, a Faculty of Letters, has a monopoly there. **For Hénin, to limit the excellence of the Sorbonne to Paris 4, therefore to Letters and the Humanities, is selling the renown of the name at a cheap price, as the Sorbonne also covers other disciplines.** Paris 1, which manages high quality partnerships with Cairo, Thessalonica, Galatassaray and also Columbia in New York and Oxford, is enraged to see the doors to the Gulf States closed in its face, although educational projects there could be enormous and the University has skills that others do not. We met with the **President of the Qatar Foundation, Dr. Mohamed Fathy Saoud**, who invested \$5 billion in his “City of Education”. He is very clear, “We want to sign with the best institutions in France. We are very open to all opportunities and we are also talking with major business schools.” One understands rapidly from his words that if universities don’t go, business schools will.

Finally, if exclusivity was truly granted to Abu Dhabi on the use of the “Sorbonne” name for the entire Middle East, **Hénin** then contests the financial conditions of the contract agreed to based on **case law related to the Louvre in Abu Dhabi contract.** In March 2007, the right to the “**Louvre**” name was sold for **€370 million** to the Emirates, without counting an equivalent sum to be paid in future royalties. The agreement was concluded with the help of the APIE (the agency responsible for the State’s immaterial heritage) created at the Ministry for the Economy by Thierry Breton in order to defend public trademarks. “Non-compliance with this procedure, and therefore non-respect of the Sorbonne trademark in the same conditions as the Louvre, creates a real problem,” Hénin argues.

The Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi: 1,000 Students in Five Years?

On March 14, 2008, **Jean-Robert Pitte**, having probably been a little too cocky, lost the elections for the presidency of Paris IV to **Georges Molinié**, a distinguished Professor of French Stylistics, who has shouted long and loud his leftist ideas and strong opposition to the **Valérie Pécresse’s** “LRU” reform. For the past 18 months, he has turned Paris IV into a bastion in the fight against the university reform, which has led to an interesting result that neither **Sarkozy** nor Abu Dhabi probably expected: the Emirate is currently bound by an exclusivity agreement with the most rebellious faculty in France with regard to Nicolas Sarkozy’s university reforms. As early as May 2008, **Molinié** declared to Challenges magazine that “the idea that one can sell the Sorbonne name, which doesn’t even belong to us, is a joke.” He denigrates the Abu Dhabi contract, “There, 90% of the students speak Arabic or English: we simply teach them French,” and he refers to the “unacceptable misuse of the Sorbonne” and suggests that Pitte had not made many demands in terms of contractual conditions. “These are simply better quality French classes.” In the fall of 2008, he went to Abu Dhabi to impose new educational content “more worthy of the Sorbonne” in the history, geography, history of art and other programs in the context of a B.A. in Letters. And he was even able to oust **General Omar Al Bitar**, who was the Vice-Chair of the Board of Directors of the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi. Today, the Sorbonne sends eight



department directors on site, plus professors, who teach for eight to 15 days at a time. And yet, the project is far from achieving its enrolment objective of 2,000 students. “We revised it to 1,000 students over five years,” explains Professor **Michel Fichant**, a member of the Board of Directors of Sorbonne Abu Dhabi, adding, “To create an entirely French university in this region, which is 100% English-speaking, is a risky challenge.” He believes that a recruitment office will be required to attract applicants, bearing in mind that **New York University** will be inaugurating a campus next year and will also offer courses in Letters and the Humanities.

Four hundred students are currently attending the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi, including 120 in “year zero”, which is a year dedicated to introduction to French. However, one strong point negotiated by **Pitte** and tied to the open-mindedness now reigning in the Emirates: gender equality and religious freedom, which means that there are no prayer rooms on the campus.

Investigated by Patrick Fauconnier