



# Ambassador's Activities

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Speech by HE Bernard Emié,  
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at Eton College

03 May 2013

Mr Clarke,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Students,

A few words to begin with, to tell you how happy I am to be at Eton College today and to be able to address you, who are among your country's most brilliant and promising minds.

Happy, it's true, but I must also admit that I'm facing a perilous task this evening, because from reading the press lately I gather that Eton College has become the *bête noire* of many media outlets, which present the institution as an exclusive antechamber of power which has its own language, is impenetrable to the uninitiated, and practises sports that exist nowhere else.<sup>1</sup>

I must therefore be careful not to alienate anyone here, because in the next 10 or 15 years some members of this audience may be in government, the shadow cabinet or the country's major economic and financial institutions!

Joking apart, you're aware that you'll be called upon to hold some of the top political, economic and cultural responsibilities in the United Kingdom, a country whose destiny is very closely linked to that of France.

Indeed, 19 prime ministers have studied on these benches, including the first one to hold the office, Robert Walpole, and the current occupant of Number 10, David Cameron. Following recent changes in Downing Street, no fewer than six of Mr Cameron's close advisers are old Etonians. Eton also taught renowned economists like John Maynard Keynes and major artists like George Orwell – who are both revered in France and have considerable influence there – as well as the present Archbishop of Canterbury, a great Francophone and Francophile, and several members of the royal family such as, only recently, Princes William and Harry.

So I know my speech will be addressed to keen, well-informed listeners. I'd also like it to be lively, and I'll try to leave enough time to answer all your questions.

I came here this evening to talk about the future of the Franco-British relationship in the context of the European project. The vitality of our relationship is a necessity for the present but also for the future.

### I/ A bilateral relationship based on solid and diverse ties

France and the UK resemble one another, even if history has separated us at times. We're the world's fifth and seventh economies, but above all trading partners of the first order: Britain is France's fifth-largest client, and France is the UK's fourth-largest supplier. The vitality of our trade owes a great deal, it's true, to the complementary nature of our economies, with our trade in industrial products and services, but it's also explained by the massive presence of French businesses in the UK and British companies in France. Let me remind you there are nearly 300,000 French people living in Britain, and they play a full part in this country's economic dynamism.

Our relationship is also reflected in cultural, educational and linguistic exchanges that are both fruitful and diverse. 15,000 French people are currently studying at universities in the United Kingdom, which is a considerable number. Likewise, France welcomes with open arms the thousands of young Britons – I very much hope you'll be among them – who go to pursue their studies in our universities and *grandes écoles*, and we offer excellent courses that are internationally recognized.

I'm also delighted that the use of French – the main foreign language taught here across the Channel – is still just as widespread.

Finally – and this will be the central point of my speech today – our two countries are essential political and strategic partners.

### II/ In an ever more unstable world, the Franco-British relationship is clearly crucial

Our situations are, as you know, very similar: we're the leading military powers in Europe, nuclear powers, permanent members of the UN Security Council, major EU and NATO

partners, and we both have an ambition to play a diplomatic role at global level and be among the world powers.

France and the UK hold common responsibilities, alongside our allies, in terms of collective security and keeping the peace, and we share the strong belief that we must maintain and indeed strengthen our close cooperation with the UN and other international organizations. Moreover, 75% of the draft resolutions presented to the UN Security Council are jointly drawn up by our two countries.

This Franco-British relationship is clearly all the more essential because our two countries today face major challenges. First of all, an unstable world afflicted by diffuse and elusive threats, such as terrorism, the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and a lack of cooperation from some countries. The rise of major emerging powers like China, India and Brazil threatens to downgrade our military and strategic power and even make it obsolete. We also face domestic challenges: you're aware that our public finances are under strain, and this is forcing us each to rethink the structure of our military apparatus and the practicalities of deploying our forces abroad. This has also been the focus of the British Strategic Defence and Spending Review and the French White Paper on Defence and National Security, two exercises carried out at similar times on either side of the Channel.

But we share these difficulties and constraints. And because we both believe we can overcome them better together, Franco-British defence and security cooperation is the obvious and necessary way forward.

That's the spirit of the Lancaster House agreement signed in 2010, which, for the first time in our respective histories, envisages cooperation on nuclear deterrence, the development of military technology, and the creation of a permanent Combined Joint Expeditionary Force by 2016.

The events of the last three years illustrate the pertinence of the agreement and the importance of its being implemented.

We saw it during the Libya crisis, when the French and British conducted operations side by side. We're seeing it today in Mali, with Britain's unwavering political and military support for France in her battle to restore Mali's sovereignty and combat international terrorism in the Sahel.

I'd like our economic, cultural and strategic cooperation to develop and broaden, because it will partly shape tomorrow's ties between our two countries. You'll very soon be players in this, and I'm counting on you.

### III/ Whilst our bilateral relationship is essential, our common future is still in Europe

Finally, I'd like to speak about that other great project in which both France and the UK have taken part: Europe. Europe was at the origin of peace and reconciliation after two world wars. It's also about prosperity, with the great single market. Above all, it's about young people, exchanges and mobility. It's a project for the future, to be constantly reinvented and renewed. Let me talk to you about that Europe.

As you know, the European Union and in particular the Euro Area have been experiencing major difficulties since 2010. The financial crisis – which posed an existential risk to our single currency and threatened to drag countries like Ireland, Greece and Portugal down with it – is behind us, but a great deal remains to be done.

Growth on our continent is still too weak, and unemployment, particularly among young people, has reached intolerable levels. We must directly address this problem, which is undermining young people's confidence in their future.

That's why the European countries – including France, who has played a major role in initiating proposals since President François Hollande was elected – have been working for the past year to revitalize economic activity, investment and employment in the EU.

Because if Europe is a project of peace, it's also a project of shared prosperity and a project of solidarity. That has characterized it since its creation in 1957.

Today, this imperative of solidarity seems to have been called into question, by a rise in national egoisms but also an ever stronger resentment of Europe itself, which no longer seems to be turning this project of prosperity and wealth distribution into reality.

That's why we believe the crisis we're experiencing shows there is too little – rather than too much – Europe. We must prove on a daily basis that Europe is the solution to the difficulties all our countries are facing, not their cause.

If Europe doesn't publicize its achievements, if it remains paralysed by overly strong expressions of national egoism, there's a risk of its being rejected. That risk isn't exclusive to one country or another. We experienced it in France in the referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005. We're seeing it today in Italy, in Greece, and particularly among young people. It's a worrying phenomenon, because this lack of solidarity has created fears among the young people of the EU and led to cracks in their commitment to the idea of Europe.

The UK isn't exempt from this temptation towards detachment and Euroscepticism, even though its causes are very different. I won't return now to the debate under way at the moment, which is a matter of domestic politics. I'll say only that we're observing it closely and with concern.

Allow me, though, to remind you how much the UK's young people need Europe, and how much Europe needs you. Europe needs you because you're the ones who will give it the vitality and fresh momentum it needs, which – thanks to your ability to innovate, get involved and initiate proposals – will shape its course over the coming 10, 20, 50 years. Europe will emerge from its ongoing identity crisis not by applying the formulae of the past but by placing trust in its young people. Travel, go on exchanges, learn from the experiences of your European neighbours. You'll come back transformed and convinced that the idea of Europe deserves to be shouted from the rooftops.

Most of you have grown up amid the peace and prosperity which the European project has brought us. So it's up to you to remedy the worrying silence in the United Kingdom about the EU's achievements and benefits.

I'll finish on this message of confidence. Confidence in the ability of the young elites educated in this place of excellence to demonstrate long-term vision on the UK's role in Europe. Confidence that our destiny is shared and that together we can bring alive the idea of Europe and reinvent its future./.