



Ambassador's Activities

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Ambassador of France to the United Kingdom

FCO: Seminar on the history of Franco-British relations

London, 10 October 2011

Ambassadors,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, before our next bilateral summit on December 2nd, the FCO has brought together some of the most renowned and highly qualified diplomats and professors to look into the evolution of relations between the United Kingdom and France. I warmly welcome this initiative and pay tribute in advance to the four distinguished panellists : former ambassadors at crucial moments for our two countries and historian authors of books which are essential reading for anyone interested in the complex ties between (I quote the author of the phrase, with us today) of the “sweet enemies” we’ve long been for each other.

Bookshops are today promoting a “Sunday Times” bestseller, entitled “1000 Years of Annoying the French”. It begins with a quotation: “The English, by nature, always want to fight their neighbours for no reason, which is why they all die badly.” The quote is from an anonymous, but quite obviously French bourgeois chronicler at the time of the Hundred Years War. But the book’s author is English, and he goes on to explain that William the Conqueror wasn’t French, that the English didn’t burn Joan of Arc, but that they invented the guillotine.

It’s a safe bet that a few hundred years from now, the UK and France will still be staring at one another, and the French and British still heckling each other. It’s the prerogative of being neighbours: when you look over your garden wall, you see France. The memory of our chivalrous rivalries, the clang of our old armour and clashing of our rugby players in the scrum will always cater to our chauvinistic instincts.

Admittedly, recalling our adventurous past gives us the impression that we’re great. But the greatness isn’t set in stone, and both our countries are now

looking to the future and other challenges they've chosen to take up together. It's of course a choice initiated with the Entente Cordiale and confirmed when we fought shoulder to shoulder in two world wars. A choice dictated by our shared values, close interests and similar ambitions. By uniting, we give ourselves the means to stay relevant and maintain our leadership in a world with a greater number of players, and where our partners have become more powerful.

For our two countries, the results speak for themselves. You know what they are: our November 2010 treaties on defence and nuclear simulation ; our common engagement in Libya, our joint initiatives in the face of the Tehran and Damascus regimes ; the common industrial base we're preparing to build in the civilian nuclear power sector; our shared efforts to improve global governance and so on. I took up my duties in London just over six months ago, and since my arrival every day has confirmed my impression that at bilateral level, our two countries are enjoying a period of particularly close relations.

However, two issues seem to me particularly challenging :

1) Today, the UK and France have chosen to move closer together by engaging in intense bilateral cooperation. Looking at the experiences of the past fifteen years, do we think we could have done anything differently?

- Over the past decade or so, the Franco-British rapprochement hasn't been linear. There was of course the Iraq episode. I want to believe that it was a blip and a historical accident, and Gérard Errera will be talking to you about it. It was quite separate from anything else – “*sui generis*” – seen through the enlarging and deforming prism of Levantine passions. As Europeans, today we're also far more conscious of being “in the same boat”, which isn't necessarily any longer always the same as that of our major partners.

- The Franco-British rapprochement has been marked by two major milestones: Saint-Malo and Lancaster House. At the time of its conclusion, Saint-Malo spawned huge hopes. In Africa, thirteen years after Jacques Chirac and Tony Blair's accord, "the Saint-Malo spirit", to use the time-honoured expression, "has replaced the Fashoda spirit" and there are almost no differences between our policies vis-à-vis that continent. But what's Saint-Malo's legacy in European defence? We've made headway, in the CSDP framework, but at a slower pace and with a more modest level of ambition than that envisaged in 1998. It's still a sensitive issue and we haven't given up hope of finding compromises.

- The Lancaster House treaty explores a different path: developing pragmatic cooperation between the UK and France, the two major players in European defence. Yesterday's Senior Level Group meeting, co-chaired by Jean-David Lévitte, Diplomatic adviser to the French President, and Sir Peter Ricketts, National Security Adviser, highlighted many concrete results, already delivered. Of course, France remains committed to finding an interface between our bilateral cooperation projects and our expectations for European defence. We've still got our differences, but, looking ahead to December's Franco-British summit, we're actively seeking the most ambitious compromise possible between the Weimar group's aspirations and the British constraints which those living in London well understand.

2) Generally speaking, at a time when Franco-British cooperation is excellent in the international organizations – and first and foremost at the Security Council (75% of UNSCR are Franco-British originated) – it is, by definition, viewed in a different light in the European Union framework. The UK and France are together defending the objective of budgetary discipline in the negotiation of the next Financial Perspectives. We share too, in particular, the aim of simplifying European regulations and improving the performance of EU policies promoting

research. But what are the consequences of a major difference between us: the UK's non-membership of the euro area? To what extent is this difference in status a handicap for Franco-British leadership in Europe, and for our ability, long term, to deepen this strategic relationship? How are the resolution of the euro area's difficulties, essential for Europe's future, and stronger cooperation within the euro area going to affect the UK interests and the development of our relations in all sectors ?

I'm expecting some stimulating exchanges and thinking "outside the box" from our distinguished panellists, whose exceptional experience will help put the impressive progress achieved in Franco-British relations into perspective. Since 1994, our two countries have been linked not by a bridge but by a tunnel, which is an incentive to dig deep and think hard about the bedrock of our relations.

So let the discussion begin. I know it's going to be fascinating !