



Ambassador's Activities

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

at the inauguration of Saint-Gobain's Innovation Centre

13 March 2013

Managing Director,
General Delegate,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a pleasure and an honour to take part in this inauguration of Saint-Gobain's new Innovation Centre, situated in the very heart of London. Saint-Gobain plays a leading role in housing in the United Kingdom and globally.

This prestigious company, which is more than three centuries old, has been present in Britain for nearly 30 years and makes a major contribution to the United Kingdom's economy, employing some 17,000 people here. It's also one of nearly 3,000 French companies established in the UK which together employ more than 360,000 people and contribute hugely to employment in this country. Equally striking are the 2,100 British firms settled in France, which employ over 260,000 people there, in both industry and services. All these businesses make an outstanding contribution to the vitality and solidity of the Franco-British economic and trade partnership, with bilateral trade of €67 billion in 2012 and a net surplus for France of €6.6 billion – up on 2011.

This inauguration provides me with an opportunity to emphasize these close and fruitful ties, also illustrated by Saint-Gobain's long-term presence.

It also gives me a chance for me to pay tribute to the commitment which Saint-Gobain has made to sustainable development by setting itself the ambition of becoming the reference point in the sustainable housing field.

This is an issue crucial to our society's future which requires significant investment on research and innovation. But the particularly difficult economic context often leads companies to limit or sacrifice this spending on the future.

The Saint-Gobain group is exemplary in choosing to make innovation one of the pillars of its growth strategy, because in 2012 it invested nearly £363 million in R&D and submitted nearly 400 patents, and it currently has nearly 700 research projects under way. The position Saint-Gobain now enjoys nationally and internationally owes a great deal to its capacity to innovate.

This capacity for innovation is also essential for maintaining industrial activity and jobs in France and the UK.

Both the French and British governments have put the energy transition at the heart of their priorities. Our two countries also share ambitious targets to cut greenhouse gas emissions and fight climate change. The action taken will help fulfil the “20-20-20” targets set at European Union level in 2008 and adopted in the Europe 2020 strategy. The Green Deal plan, which the government launched earlier this year, aims to make it easier to pay for energy efficiency and insulation work undertaken in existing buildings. It could provide a wealth of opportunities for the Saint Gobain group.

So the opening of the Innovation Centre, showcasing innovative technology for designing building materials, responds to the sustainable development needs voiced by the public and the authorities alike. Congratulations to Saint-Gobain’s directors on the way forward they have chosen, because this new centre is an important link in the chain to help our society meet the challenges posed by sustainable development in its environmental, economic and societal dimensions./.