



Ambassador's Activities

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

Annual General Meeting – Franco-British Society

FCO, 14 May 2012

Mr Chairman, *cher* Lord Watson,

My Lords,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great pleasure for me to speak to you this evening at the Annual General Meeting of the prestigious Franco-British Society, and I thank you very much indeed for your kind invitation.

The venue could not have been better chosen. What more appropriate place for your organization – and for a French ambassador to the United Kingdom – than the Entente Cordiale Room at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office?

It's sometimes forgotten that the expression "Entente Cordiale" was first applied to the good relations established between our two countries by King Louis Philippe and Queen Victoria as early as the 1840s, which reminds us how long-standing and solid our ties are.

But the name of this room chiefly refers, of course, to the Entente Cordiale of 1904, characterized by a determination to overcome the disputes between our two nations and achieve a necessary alliance.

I / The Franco-British Society

That Entente Cordiale was also the inspiration for the Franco-British Society, founded in 1924.

And I'm keen to pay tribute this evening to your organization's work in promoting closer ties between our two countries. By doing so, it helps the Franco-British relationship move towards an honest partnership that is ever broader and more solid.

By emphasizing cultural, educational and social activities, the Franco-British Society also provides a useful reminder that links between countries are built not only at the top – on the political level, through treaties and accords – but also from the bottom up, through ties of cultural proximity and friendship forged on a daily basis between individuals and peoples.

I also welcome the outstanding work done by Lord Watson to breathe new life into the Franco-British Society, particularly by encouraging new blood and a greater mix of generations. A remarkable example of this was the debate on the elections in France, organized on 24th April in partnership with King's College London and The Franco-British Connections.

This opening-up and new dynamism enable the Franco-British Society, alongside other civil society institutions, to contribute fully to the wealth and diversity of our bilateral relationship. I congratulate you on it and thank you for it.

II / The current political situation in France and the outlook both in terms of foreign policy and for the bilateral relationship

An impressive record in our relations:

- the Lancaster House treaties
- the 17th February 2012 summit: civilian nuclear energy
- close consultation on foreign policy: joint initiatives: Libya, Syria, 80% of UN Security Council resolutions Franco-British originated

Since I've uttered the word "elections", allow me now to speak to you briefly about the current political situation in France, a subject which is of course on everyone's mind at the moment.

As you know, the French people made a clear choice on 6th May by electing François Hollande President of the Republic.

On 8th May, President Nicolas Sarkozy chose to involve François Hollande in the ceremonies commemorating VE Day, as a way of showing the state's continuity within a well-organized and republican transition. It was a strong gesture.

Tomorrow, 15th May, the official transfer of power will take place from Nicolas Sarkozy to François Hollande. It will be a solemn moment, one of dignity and emotion, both for the teams who have held the highest responsibilities for the past five years and for those preparing to assume them, at a crucial time for our country and Europe.

A government should then be formed, pending the general election to be held in France on 10th and 17th June. On this point, let me remind you – echoing your debate on 24th April – that French people living abroad, particularly in the UK, will also be choosing deputies for the first time. Outside France, the first round has been brought forward to 3rd June.

So only after the general election will a more lasting and doubtless broader government be formed that will have the confidence of the National Assembly majority which emerges from the ballot boxes.

It's therefore too early to paint a very detailed picture of the foreign policy the government intends to conduct.

However, as you know, according to the constitutional system it's the Head of State who sets the broad guidelines of our foreign policy. So – regardless of the general election result – we can recall a few points made during the election campaign, when François Hollande set out his programme.

Two points seem to me to be already on the cards:

A / Continuity will be important;

B / Pragmatism and negotiation will be needed when policy changes are called for.

A / Continuity is important

Continuity will be important because the fundamentals of our relationship remain unchanged. Indeed, we are still countries that:

- are similar in size (population, GDP, defence capabilities),
- are partners (in trade, security and culture but also at individual and day-to-day level),
- share common values (democracy, human rights, collective security),
- are parties to the same treaties and institutions (the International Criminal Court, founder members and key players in the G8 and G20),
- share responsibilities (permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, major players in the defence field in Europe, key members of NATO, nuclear weapons states).

So when he spoke at King's College on 29 February, François Hollande clearly expressed his determination to continue forging closer defence ties with the UK, in line with the spirit of Saint-Malo and the Lancaster House treaties. Likewise, he says he wants more intensive cooperation between our two countries at industrial level including in the energy sector.

Moreover – and it's no secret, because reports of it appeared in the press – the candidate's "envoys" both in Paris and abroad built up contacts with the governments of our main partners, including the UK of course, prior to the 6th May result. Those contacts have made it possible to emphasize this same desire for continuity in our cooperation in the most strategic areas.

B / When policy changes are deemed necessary, French diplomacy will always act in a spirit of consultation and in close agreement with our partners.

There will, of course, be changes in foreign policy, whether as regards Afghanistan, Africa or at European level.

But those changes will be made pragmatically, by seeking acceptable compromises with our partners.

An example of this pragmatic approach already seems to be emerging in the desire to add a growth pact to the European budget-discipline pact. So if François Hollande is keen for a more balanced policy mix to be defined in the European Union, combining genuine budgetary discipline at national level with measures to promote growth at European level (the introduction of project bonds, strengthening the European Investment Bank, a more effective use of European funds, a financial transaction tax for investing in infrastructure, etc.), he will, of course, ensure this is done in close consultation and coordination with his various European partners.

I also note that the determination expressed by François Hollande to put growth at the heart of Europe's action – without giving up consolidating our public finances – ties up with the

concerns shared by our British friends, on both sides of the political divide. The election of François Hollande has put the theme of growth back at the heart of the European debate. In conclusion, let me remind you that Prime Minister David Cameron has expressed his wish to continue working very closely with the French government. Allow me, for the record, to quote the communiqué Downing Street issued following François Hollande's election (and David Cameron was one of the very first world leaders to telephone François Hollande on the evening of 6th May): "The Prime Minister called President-Elect Hollande this evening and congratulated him on his victory. They both look forward to working very closely together in the future and building on the very close relationship that already exists between the UK and France."

A first bilateral meeting will be held very soon. We can't say any more today. But as you know, while the international agenda over the coming days is extremely packed, with G8 then NATO summits in Chicago on 20th and 21st May and a European summit on 23rd, these all represent opportunities for organizing these first meetings between our two leaders.

Thank you./.