



Ambassador's Activities

2012

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

Annual General Meeting – Franco-British Society

London, 24 May 2012

Mr President, *cher* Arnaud Vaissié

Members of the Board of Directors and of the Advisory Council,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I / The French Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain in 2012

It's a great pleasure for me to attend, for the second time, the Annual General Meeting of the French Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain.

As you know, I firmly believe the role of entrepreneurs is at the heart of the strong bilateral relationship between our two countries.

In 2011, France was the UK's fourth-largest customer and sixth-largest supplier, and the UK was France's fifth-largest customer and seventh-largest supplier. French exports to the United Kingdom accounted for nearly 6% of British imports. France was the third-largest investor in the UK in terms of stocks, while the UK was the fourth-largest source of investments in France.

The strength of our bilateral relationship is largely due to the robust partnerships between our companies in various sectors such as defence, energy, the environment, construction and infrastructure. There are more than 1,500 French companies in the United Kingdom, employing nearly 400,000 people, and 2,350 British companies in France, employing more than 250,000 people.

The continuation and strengthening of our industrial partnerships are key to revitalizing our economies. In the defence sector, SAFRAN, EADS and Thales have all invested in the UK and have become British. Another sector, energy, is of strategic importance to our countries, with EDF being the top electricity producer in the UK.

Other sectors are key to stimulating our economies and jobs, particularly environmental services, construction and infrastructure. Veolia Environnement employs more than 16,500 people in the waste management, water management and energy services sectors. Saint-Gobain employs 16,500 people here, while Bouygues and Vinci, players in the construction and infrastructure sectors, total more than 9,000 jobs.

But the bedrock of our bilateral economic relationship is of course the important network of British and French SMEs. The French Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain provides essential support for them to develop and gain international reach, thus helping stimulate our economies.

The CCFGB, which has been present in the United Kingdom since 1883, is the oldest chamber of commerce in this country. It's also the leading foreign chamber of commerce in the United Kingdom. The dynamism of its 600 companies shows the importance of the economic ties uniting our two countries.

So I'd like to pay tribute to the CCFGB's involvement in advising our companies on their efforts to gain a foothold and develop. I also want to stress the CCFGB's important work in opening up new networks to them by means of high-calibre events.

I would of course like to continue being involved in the major events organized by the Chamber. I know the Ambassador's briefings are eagerly awaited by your members! I welcome the interest of your members, both French and British, in France's economic and foreign policy.

For that very reason, I'll come back in a few minutes to the current political situation in France and the outlook both in terms of foreign policy and for our bilateral relationship.

On 12 June, I'll be hosting the next cross-cultural forum at the French Residence. Since 2009 the forum has been improving the understanding of managerial and entrepreneurial culture on both sides of the Channel.

I very much enjoyed leading the trade mission that was organized to Leeds. Indeed, it strikes me as essential for companies to know more about the remarkable economic opportunities existing outside London. I welcome the Chamber's decision to organize the next visit, to Wales, and hopefully then to Scotland.

Thank you for your professionalism and the excellent events I've been able to take part in. This annual meeting is an opportunity for me to thank all those who contribute to the Chamber's dynamism and impact, in particular its president, Mr Arnaud Vaissié. I'd like to pay a special tribute to him tonight, because he's just been made an *Officier* in the *Ordre National du Mérite*.

Toutes mes félicitations, cher Arnaud.

This distinction is a token of appreciation for the work he's done for the French community, be it for the French Chamber of Commerce or on the board of the new College Français Bilingue de Londres, which you helped create.

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

Having talked about the Chamber's recent achievements, I believe it's my duty, as French Ambassador to the UK, to take this opportunity to say a few words about the current political situation in France and the outlook both in terms of foreign policy and for the bilateral relationship.

We have an impressive record in our relations:

- the Lancaster House treaties
- the 17 February 2012 summit on civilian nuclear energy
- close consultation on foreign policy, with our joint initiatives on Libya and Syria, and with France and the UK initiating 80% of UN Security Council resolutions

I know you've just been casting your votes on a number of issues at this AGM. And since I've uttered the word "votes", allow me now to speak to you briefly about the current political situation in France, a subject which is of course on everyone's minds at the moment.

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

On 8 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 republican transition. It was a powerful gesture.

On 15 May, the official transfer of power took place from Nicolas Sarkozy to François Hollande. It was 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 was formed, pending the general election to be held in France on 10 and 17 June. On this point, let me remind you that French people living abroad, particularly in the UK, will also be choosing deputies for the first time. This will be the case for many of you here tonight. Outside France, the first round has been brought forward to 3 June.

So only after the general election will the French government have the confidence of the National Assembly majority which emerges from the ballot boxes.

It's therefore too early to paint a full 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. Naturally, it's also he who will represent France in the most important meetings on the international agenda, as was the case in the United States last week.

Indeed, President Hollande wasted no time in getting down to work in the international arena. On 15 May – the very first day of his presidency – he paid his first visit to Berlin. On 18 May he was off again, on a veritable “diplomatic marathon” including meetings in Washington, the G8 summit in Camp David and the NATO summit in Chicago.

You probably all saw the warm welcome the President received from Barack Obama, and he had “frank and straightforward” talks with his fellow world leaders. Of course it's only a first step, but I think we can safely say François Hollande's stance on the importance of growth was welcomed by the G8, and it was at the top of the agenda. At the NATO summit, too, the new President's position was clear. His commitment to the French people to withdraw combat forces by the end of 2012, if the security conditions allow, was well understood and accepted by our allies.

So in view of François Hollande's programme pledges during the election campaign and his first international steps as President-elect, two points seem to me to be already on the cards for his mandate, regardless of the general election result:

A / Continuity will be important in Franco-British relations;

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" in Paris and abroad built up contacts with the governments of our main partners, including the UK of course, prior to the 6 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 fiscal compact. 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.). But as he reiterated yesterday in Brussels, he will, of course, ensure this is done in close consultation and coordination with his various European partners.

The determination expressed by François Hollande to put growth at the heart of Europe's action while also straightening out the public finances also ties up with the concerns of our British friends, on both sides of the political divide. The election of President Hollande has put the theme of growth back at the heart of the European debate. I believe this is partly why he received such a warm welcome from his fellow leaders, particularly President Obama.

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 6 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 between our two leaders was held very soon after François Hollande took office. It was the first opportunity the two leaders could find in a busy agenda and it took place at the British Embassy in Washington DC, prior to the G8 summit. David Cameron and François Hollande reiterated our two countries’ commitment to keep working closely together in the fields of defence cooperation and energy. They also saw each other again yesterday in Brussels for the European summit.

I won’t go into the details, but I can tell you that direct contacts were also made very swiftly between key members of the French government and their British counterparts. Every opportunity for bilateral meetings will be seized in the coming days and weeks. So as you can see, Anglo-French cooperation remains on track. We firmly believe it is not only mutually beneficial but also strategic.

Well, I thought it would be useful for you to hear my insights on our partnership at this very special time, but I hope I haven’t gone on too long!

Thanks again, and please keep up the good work you’re doing at the French Chamber of Commerce./.