

Speech by H.E. Sylvie Bermann
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom
at the gala dinner of the French Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain
22 March 2016

Mr Mayor,

Madame la Présidente, chère Estelle,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

It's a great pleasure to be with you for the gala dinner of the French Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain, raising money this evening for the charity Emmaus. The Chamber of Commerce and Emmaus have something in common: the spirit of mutual assistance that drives both organizations. The invitation made by [Emmaus founder] Abbé Pierre to his first "companion" is still famous: "I can't help you, I have nothing to give you. But you can help me to help others." A few months ago I had the honour of awarding the *Légion d'Honneur* to Selwyn Image, the founder of Emmaus UK, on behalf of the French President. I'm happy we're broadening the Chamber's role of cooperation between British and French businesses by supporting Emmaus's work with the most disadvantaged people, so that each of us can "help to help others". I thank Estelle [Brachlianoff] and Florence [Gomez].

This year, at this important annual gathering, we'll be listening to Sadiq Khan; I welcome him. The bilateral relationship between France and the UK is firmly based on a shared history with many facets – diplomacy, defence, energy (not to mention sport, because today, the twenty-second of March, is the anniversary of a still-too-little-known event: the first "Crunch" between the France and England rugby teams in nineteen-oh-six!). Our close relationship, reflected statistically in billions of pounds or euros, is nurtured by countless personal exchanges, partnerships and stories of businesses all over the country, large or small, whose development the Chamber has long experience of supporting – we had the opportunity to see this again recently during a visit to Liverpool.

The businesses investing here face new ways of working, thinking and trading. Today those businesses – particularly those in London serving other markets – are experiencing uncertainty due to the UK’s decision to leave the European Union. Sadiq Khan will almost certainly tell us about *London’s European and Global Future*¹, which he set out recently in response to the government’s Brexit strategy.

In preparing for this discussion, the EU has stayed remarkably united. Concrete dialogue can be started once the UK has given notice of its intention to leave the Union and set out its wishes.

There are several question marks, but one of the chief concerns for both sides is to protect their national citizens. I know everyone is focused on this, and the Mayor of London has already called on the government to retain the capacity to attract talent – talent which, combined with British manpower, makes London’s services so strong. Close attention will be paid to how the rights of people already in this country are protected.

I’m particularly grateful to Sadiq Khan for the many initiatives he has taken in this field, and for consulting ambassadors regularly. I appreciate the fact that you wanted to meet the EU ambassadors as quickly as possible after the Brexit vote, to listen to our concerns.

Brexit will change the nature of relations between the EU and the United Kingdom. We didn’t want it, and nor did you, *cher* Sadiq Khan. There will be adjustments to the way companies do business. It’s not a decision by European capitals seeking to undermine Britain’s or London’s activity, it’s a concrete need which companies will have to address. Businesses here in Britain – be they of British origin or not – and local authorities will, in my view, play an essential role in clarifying to the government the right way to respond to the challenges presented.

In his little book *Les Anglais*, André Maurois observed that Britain’s foreign policy was “guided by instincts rather than principles”. I have no doubt we can rely on this pragmatic and constructive approach, which, (combined with France’s Cartesian method,) forms the backbone of the bilateral relationship between France and the UK.

To conclude, I thank the Chamber for its welcome, I congratulate it on its excellent work and its events, and I wish you all a very pleasant evening.

¹Titre de la réponse du Maire de Londres au Livre blanc du gouvernement sur la stratégie de sortie de l'Union européenne.