

Speech by H.E. Sylvie Bermann
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom
at the Franco-British Business Awards
26 November 2015

Chère Estelle,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to attend this sixteenth Franco-British Business Awards ceremony.

This is the first contact I have had with the Franco-British business community since the tragic events in Paris.

I'd like to take this opportunity to say how very touched I have been by the many messages of support the Embassy has received over the past two weeks from not just the British authorities, but also the business sector.

In these difficult times, as François Hollande and David Cameron said on Monday, France and the UK stand more united than ever.

Tonight's ceremony is another symbol of this unity. As you know, business is at the very heart of our bilateral relations.

To give only two examples, in twenty-fourteen France was the United Kingdom's second-largest foreign investor.

At the same time, France was the number one destination in Europe for British investment.

These figures owe much to the creativity and dynamism of both French and British entrepreneurs. It is fitting that we should pay tribute to them tonight.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The overwhelming majority of big French companies operate in the United Kingdom, and I am delighted to see three of them nominated tonight for the Large Corporate Award.

These companies symbolize, in their own fields, French tradition and creativity, and their success is driven by their ability to combine the best of both countries.

Allow me to say a special word about EDF, as President Xi's recent visit to the UK resulted in decisive steps being taken towards the company building a nuclear plant at Hinkley Point.

This project will provide secure, low-carbon energy to UK homes and reinforce the alliance between France and Britain for decades to come.

What is less known is that our smaller companies are performing very well too. The three start-ups nominated tonight are competing successfully on global markets, and their success is particularly inspiring.

I'd like to take a moment to tell you what the French government is doing to help more SMEs innovate, invest and succeed, both in France and abroad.

Firstly, we are cutting taxes and social contributions for all businesses. The tax burden has already been reduced by twenty-four billion euros in two years, and that figure will reach forty billion euros by twenty-seventeen.

Secondly, we are supporting and promoting the French start-up ecosystem. The "French Tech initiative" includes a six-billion-euro R&D tax credit programme as well as a billion-euro fund to finance innovation through Bpifrance, the French public investment bank.

We also aim to attract international talent to France: last year, for the first time, we organized the “Paris French Tech ticket”, a contest that helped a hundred foreign entrepreneurs set up their companies in Paris. Each of them receives twelve-thousand-five-hundred euros and is eligible for fast-track visa procedures and free space in a leading incubator.

Thirdly, we are working with the British government to help grow the digital economy.

As you know, the United Kingdom and France are at the forefront on open data, and our two governments have pioneered the digitization of public services.

Our two governments strongly support the initiatives taken at EU level to deepen the single market. In July, George Osborne and Emmanuel Macron created a joint France-UK Data Taskforce to enhance cooperation on open data, bringing together leading entrepreneurs and experts from both sides of the Channel.

The taskforce will make proposals in the coming months, especially on ways to boost data access for SMEs.

The French Embassy in the UK has also stepped up its efforts to support innovation and entrepreneurship. Let me give you just two examples.

In October, I had the pleasure of hosting the first *Jeudigital* abroad, in London - *Jeudigital* is a start-up pitching event -, helping French entrepreneurs meet potential British investors.

Early this month, we organized with the French Chamber a Franco-British digital conference in London. It was a great success, and we were pleased to hear speeches from the French and the British ministers in charge of the digital economy.

This proves that the French Chamber of Commerce is an essential partner in our economic diplomacy, and I'd like to thank Estelle, Florence and their team for organizing tonight's ceremony.

I also want to congratulate all the nominees for their spirit of initiative and their determination. I wish you all a very pleasant dinner.

Thank you.