

Speech by H.E. Sylvie Bermann
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom
at the annual reception of the Franco-British Lawyers Society
at the House of Lords
Monday 25 January 2015

Lord Speaker (Baroness D'Souza),
Lord Hope (of Craighead),
Monsieur le Président et Bâtonnier (Bernard Vatier),
Judges,
Professors,
Lawyers,
Lords, ladies and gentlemen,
Chers amis,

It's an honour and a pleasure for me, this year, to be invited back to such a prestigious venue, and I want to extend a particular greeting to Baroness D'Souza and Lord Hope, who do us the honour of being here.

I began last year's speech by recalling the tragedy France had experienced with the attacks committed on the seventh of January twenty-fifteen and on the days that followed. I was unaware of how heavily fear, death and other tragedies would continue to weigh on that year. Those tragedies targeted a great many countries, in addition to France, and in Sousse, Tunisia, they claimed the lives of your compatriots.

I recalled the heavy responsibilities shouldered by the community you represent, although I couldn't have predicted the extent to which all of you, who embody the legal professions, would be called upon and engaged in a daily battle against terrorism.

By visiting Belfast last year, where I met the Lord Chief Justice and many illustrious members of your society, I was able to appreciate how central this type of situation had been to Northern Ireland's history for so many years.

I understand that during the seminar on "Investigating suspicious deaths, inquests and inquiries", organized in Belfast in November on your vice-president Fionnuala [*prononcer : Finoula*] Connolly's initiative, everyone who was present observed a minute's silence in memory of the victims of the Paris attacks. The Lord Chief Justice said: "We, here, particularly understand how you feel."

So, yes, let me say clearly that we're united in the battle against terrorism, and together we want to fight this battle with due regard for the rule of law.

Throughout twenty-fifteen, you celebrated the rule of law with pomp and pride during the commemorations marking the eight-hundredth anniversary of Magna Carta. The scale of the Global Law Summit left a strong impression on our French visitors attending it, especially the Minister of Justice and the Vice-President of the *Conseil d'Etat*. And I'm extremely proud

that we – along with the Franco-British Lawyers Society and the Franco-British Council – contributed to that great moment in national life, and beyond, through our conference at Lancaster House in June, which drew parallels between the legacy and continued relevance of Magna Carta and the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme*.

In Paris in the autumn, the *Conseil d'Etat* hosted a “return match”, which was organized by the FBLS and dedicated, like our London conference, to the memory of Roger Errera, a great facilitator between our two legal cultures, which remain so exotic to each other!

Judges, lawyers and jurists have a huge challenge to meet today: that of using every legal means at their disposal to combat the infiltration of radical extremism into Western societies, whilst remaining fiercely determined to comply with the law, the foundation stone of our democracies. In this way, we can combine the grittiest determination in the battle ahead with a profound sense of justice.

In France, lawyers and judges are actively involved in implementing legislation on the state of emergency. As the joint session of Parliament in Versailles draws near, legal questions are at the heart of an intense debate going on in society. In the United Kingdom, the issue of fundamental rights also figures prominently in political life: I'm thinking of the plans to reform the Human Rights Act – which I believe will give us less cause for concern than initially thought! – and of the tricky balance between security and freedom, at a time when we need to give our intelligence services the resources commensurate with the challenges.

The fact that the law is a living entity is one of the surest signs of the maturity of our Western societies.

Allow me to quote Shakespeare, the four-hundredth anniversary of whose death in sixteen-sixteen we will soon be commemorating. These magnificent lines are spoken by one of the characters in *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia, who is acting as an advocate, and they feature on the front of Belfast's Bar Library:

“The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.”

[La qualité de la miséricorde est comme la pluie qui tombe du ciel sur la terre, elle est deux fois bénie, par celui qui la donne et par celui qui la reçoit.]

Your society, under the impetus of its president, *Batônnier* of the Paris Bar Bernard Vatier, its four vice-presidents and its founder and honorary vice-president, our dear friend Simon Horsington, spares no effort to encourage meetings between legal experts from our two countries on the most original topical issues of the day.

I can't give an exhaustive account of your twenty-five programme, but certain subjects stick in my mind, such as arbitration, international bankruptcy, art and the law, and recent changes to family law – divorce and financial compensation.

Nor can I forget the passion you have for what you do, a passion which is conveyed to law students every year at the Careers Forum.

Finally, I must thank you once again for helping organize the conference on the French reform of contract law at the University of Westminster. You made a large contribution to stimulating greater awareness of French law within a Common Law country.

I shall take great interest in your future work and I look forward to seeing you again at the French Residence for a cocktail reception on Wednesday the eighteenth of May. Catherine Palmer will tell you more about this, but it will provide an opportunity to award, with great pomp and ceremony, the Society's academic prizes. Louis Roederer Champagnes have committed to supporting you this year in order to award a new prize, which recognizes a legal practice, in-house legal department or charitable organization which has made an outstanding contribution to helping French women lawyers practise in London. I welcome this and offer them my sincere thanks.

At this very start of twenty-sixteen – during which we shall commemorate the battles of the Somme and Verdun, not to mention the nine-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the Duke of Normandy's arrival on English soil – my wish is that your legal culture will act as a glue between our two countries. As Paul Veyne, the great expert in Roman history, notes in his splendid recent book devoted to Palmyra: *“ne connaître, ne vouloir connaître qu'une seule culture, la sienne, c'est se condamner à vivre sous un éteignoir”*, which, roughly translated, means that if we're concerned with knowing only our own culture, we cut ourselves off from everything else in the world.