

Dear Dominic,

Lords, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to host the Franco-British Society's assembly general at the French Residence tonight and to present this year's literary award.

The Franco-British Society is very important to the French Embassy, and your contribution to mutual understanding between our two countries is particularly valuable.

Our countries are very close, that is understood; but it is a mistake to take the Franco-British relationship for granted.

Whilst the strategic, economic and cultural proximity of our two countries is probably without equal in the world, new generations in the United Kingdom comprise markedly fewer French-speakers, and a fading mutual interest has been visible on the part of our two countries' elites.

We also need to rise above new misunderstandings that have set us apart since Britain joined the EU, and take into account the rapid evolution of the European situation.

It therefore makes sense to invest in the Franco-British bilateral relationship over the next twenty years.

It means rejuvenating and increasing the visibility of institutions that breathe life into the relationship in civil society: first and foremost the Franco-British Society and the Franco-British Council.

They are essential organizations today, capable of bringing together people and groups from our two countries on various substantive issues and thus hugely increasing the chances of success in diplomatic relations.

But I am convinced that these structures can join forces in order to achieve greater impact and appeal.

In that regard, David Cameron and François Hollande announced at the last Franco-British summit a major bilateral initiative: the launch of a Young Leaders programme.

This programme aims to invest in the bilateral relationship by influencing opinion-makers aged between thirty and forty, from a range of sectors.

Each year, a group of emerging leaders from government, business, media, the military, culture and civil society will be identified through a careful selection process in the two countries. Those selected will participate in two week-long residential seminars over two consecutive years – alternately in France and the UK.

The programme will be managed by the Franco-British Council, but I believe that the Franco-British Society could also contribute to it, and it will definitely be a breeding ground for leaders, who will later become members of your society. No better connection could be imagined than Dominic Grieve's involvement on both boards.

But I won't go on too long, as we are here also to celebrate two great authors, Edward Hughes and David Looseley.

I'm glad that the books that have been chosen for this literary prize pay tribute to two great French artists: Albert Camus and Edith Piaf. It is moving to see British scholars shedding new light on their lives.

When I travel in the UK and visit universities – and I have visited many – I'm always impressed by the quality of the French scholars and their passion: they are a real treasure for Franco-British relations. At the same time, I know French culture needs to be supported and celebrated in the UK whenever possible, since it is under the strain of fierce competition.

So, gentlemen, congratulations!

Finally, I know that the Franco-British Society, as a charity, will be taking part in the Queen's Patrons Lunch on the Mall on Sunday the twelfth of June, so some of us will meet again very soon for what promises to be a memorable day!

Many thanks.