

Speech by H.E. Sylvie Bermann
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom
at the ceremony to award the insignia of *Chevalier*
in the *Ordre national de la Légion d'Honneur*
to Dame Helen Alexander
at the French Residence
on 16 November 2015

Mesdames et Messieurs,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Chère Dame Helen,

It's an honour and a great joy to welcome you, together with your family, friends and colleagues past and present, to present you with the insignia of *Chevalier* in the *Ordre national de la Légion d'Honneur*, France's highest honorary decoration.

Before recalling your career and your qualities, I'd like to mention the special link you've forged with France. As a very young girl, you went to a bilingual school in Paris, and today you speak fluent French, like your grandfather. As a brilliant university student, you spent a great deal of time in our country, where you took courses in French civilization at the Sorbonne and an MBA at the INSEAD Business School. As we'll see, you maintained this special taste for France throughout your career – including on a personal level, because unless I'm mistaken you recently bought a home in the south of France, in the Var.

But like me, you also have long-standing affinities with China. After several visits to that country from the late nineteen-seventies onwards, you're now on the board of Huawei UK, a subsidiary of the Huawei Group, based in Shenzhen. And if my sources are correct, one of your children speaks Mandarin. All this demonstrates the international environment in which

you've grown – ever since your childhood, because your mother was Russian and your father a Baltic German.

You've had a brilliant career, *chère* Helen. And we're not the first to have awarded you a medal in recognition of it. After starting your career in publishing at Gerald Duckworth and Faber & Faber, you joined The Economist Group, where you stayed for twenty-three years. Beginning as Marketing Manager, you swiftly rose through the ranks and became its CEO for twelve years. Under your leadership, The Economist – which is, of course, along with The Financial Times, one of the two British titles most read by French business leaders – saw a spectacular rise in its circulation [*from two hundred and sixty-four thousand copies sold worldwide to one point three million*] and in terms of results [*which have increased by seventy-five percent*]. The Economist has become a global benchmark for economic weeklies, and you've been an architect of this remarkable success.

The media world regretted your departure from a business you had come to epitomize – “thoughtful and classy”, as it was described in a Guardian article outlining your career. But staying true to your choice, you said: “It's good to be going while people are still wanting a little more.” And that's entirely to your credit, I think!

However, you soon returned to the world of news. Today you're a trustee of Thomson-Reuters, but above all Chairman of UBM, a British media multinational, contributing to it your experience and your great knowledge of the media and marketing world.

You're also a renowned businesswoman. And every business in this country benefited from your talents when, in two-thousand-and-eight, you became the first woman President of the Confederation of British Industry since its creation in nineteen-sixty-five. As its leader, you were keen to promote British businesses internationally, while developing joint activities with its counterpart in France, the MEDEF. It too was also being led for the first time by a woman, Laurence Parisot, a very influential business leader and also a *Chevalier* in the *Ordre national de la Légion d'Honneur*. An outstanding female duo in a mostly male world.

This makes you, *chère* Helen, one of the emblematic figures in the conquest – through soft power – of women's access to decision-making posts, and in the transition to actual equality based on competence and merit. As Lord Davies' report testifies, the progress is genuine and

significant. And the business world recognizes the importance of a growing number of women in the boardroom. Why? I'll confine myself to this witticism borrowed from the bankers of Wall Street: "If Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters, the bank wouldn't have crashed!"

Chère Helen, London also owes you a great deal for your work as Chairman of the Port of London Authority. The institution, well known by everyone, works to ensure that the Thames and the Port of London are used in a safe, sustainable and economically dynamic way, while making the river and its banks an area of leisure, tourism and sport for the benefit of every generation.

Finally, you continue to bring your expertise to the world of industry and finance: you sit on the board of Rolls-Royce Group, whose former chairman, Sir Simon Robertson, I welcome here this evening, and you are an adviser to Bain Capital, an asset-management and financial services company based in Boston.

Consequently, you were made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in twenty-eleven for your major contribution to business in this country.

But your commitment is also apparent outside the business world. You've always been very active in the fields of education, media, the Internet and art. You're Chancellor of the University of Southampton, whose Vice-Chancellor, Sir Christopher Snowden, I welcome here. You're also a trustee at Thomson Reuters, the World Wide Web Foundation and the Saïd Business School in Oxford.

You use this commitment to serve France as well, in your capacity as a trustee of the Grand Palais in Paris, whose chairman, Jean-Paul Cluzel, has been kind enough to join us here this evening. The Grand Palais des Beaux-Arts is a major centre for French artistic culture and still hosts world-famous exhibitions, including the current one, which pays tribute to Elisabeth Louise Vigée Lebrun, the great eighteenth-century French portraitist, whose talent earned her a dazzling career at a time when the position of women in society was very different.

In recent years you've also played a leading role in the Franco-British Symposium, which annually brings together French and British decision-makers so they can explore ideas together. As such, you worked with the last two chairmen of Saint-Gobain, Jean-Louis Beffa

and Pierre-André de Chalendar, on topics of common interest to our two countries. In twenty-sixteen the Symposium will be held in London on the fourteenth of January.

Chère Helen, it is always with energy and enthusiasm that you tackle your projects – which embrace such a variety of fields – and talk about subjects dear to you. As a business icon in the UK, you champion international trade and are a convinced European.

For your remarkable career, for the example you set, for your personal commitment to relations between our two countries, France wanted to pay tribute to you this evening and award you our highest distinction.

Dame Helen Alexander, au nom du Président de la République et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur.