

Franco-British academic and cultural cooperation is an essential thing.

On the seventeenth of March twenty-sixteen, at the reception held at the Embassy in London for the *Journée internationale de la Francophonie*, Jo Johnson, Minister of State for Universities and Science, commented ironically in perfect French on the only peaceful debates at the family table: the ones about whether to abandon the circumflex.

To everyone's surprise, he also stressed this – and I quote: “The UK cooperates with France because it's a global leader in the field of research and innovation. The world's most important multidisciplinary research centre, the CNRS, is in France.”

And it's also here in Oxford, as it were, in the person of the Director of the Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences at the CNRS, M. Patrice Bourdelais, who has been kind enough to join us here today; and this is thanks to the Maison Française d'Oxford, where, for nearly twenty years, investments by the CNRS have been increasing.

As a special partner of the Foreign Ministry in joint research units abroad, the CNRS will take over financial responsibility for the post of Maison Française director on the first of September twenty-sixteen.

However, we should not conclude from this heightened presence of the CNRS at the Maison Française that the Foreign Ministry is stepping back.

I say this quite unequivocally in front of the highest authorities of Oxford University, including the Pro-Vice-Chancellor, William James, who is present here: the Foreign Ministry intends to contribute to the current overhaul of the Maison Française, putting it on a sounder financial and intellectually reinvigorated footing.

The four-year mandate of the incumbent director, Anne Simonin, who returns to France on the thirty-first of August, has been a difficult one.

Conscious of those difficulties, the Foreign Ministry has done its best to support the administrative restructuring of the Maison Française between twenty-twelve and twenty-sixteen, by making its expertise available and providing exceptional financial backing. This has not been at all easy in a period of very great constraints on the public finances. It also shows clearly that the Foreign Ministry has always believed in the long-term future of the Maison Française and in the project the institution embodies: of Franco-British academic and cultural cooperation with the prestigious University of Oxford.

Without listening closely to the successive cultural counsellors posted in London, Laurent Burin des Rozières and, today, François Croquette, and the Science and Technology Counsellor, Cyrille Van Effenterre; without the tireless dedication of the Secretary-General of the *Institut français* in the UK, Daniel Pirat, whom I welcome here; and without the support of the Directorate-General of Global Affairs in Paris, represented today by Florent Hérédid and Romain Brun, whom I welcome, we could not have achieved what we have.

In twenty-sixteen, the Maison Française d'Oxford has regained financial equilibrium. It has streamlined its operation for reasons which are not only financial.

The Maison has streamlined its governance with the declared ambition of being a research structure, and a centre for spreading French culture in the United Kingdom which is

adapted to the new challenges it faces. Foremost among these is to embrace natural sciences in an interdisciplinary perspective.

Indeed, for the first time in its history, the Maison Française's director will be a chemist, Frédéric Thibault-Starzyk, who is here with us now. He was unanimously elected by a committee which convened in Paris, a committee on which Pro-Vice-Chancellor William James did us the honour and kindness of sitting.

This couldn't bode better for the launch of a scientific cooperation policy whose aim is to add to, open up and explore new possibilities for cooperation in the social and natural sciences by bringing the Maison Française into contact with all four divisions of Oxford University and its researchers.

To paraphrase Pascal: learn from those who were bound like you and who now wager all they have. If you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing.

If, as I believe it will, the Maison Française wins this wager of extending and remodelling its scientific side, it will win everything.

The Maison Française is becoming a highly influential gateway to every area of Franco-British scientific cooperation at the highest level, and there are many areas.

The Maison Française must serve as a gateway to excellent Franco-British scientific cooperation both in the areas of literary, legal and ancient studies – its traditional fields of expertise – and in those of transport, theoretical and applied physics, medicine, chemistry and so on.

The circulation of French researchers at Oxford who belong to all these disciplines testifies that scientific cooperation exists and is already very dynamic. It could be boosted further with a more open Maison Française that welcomes bold, interdisciplinary projects.