

**Speech by H.E. Sylvie Bermann**  
**French Ambassador to the United Kingdom**  
**at the ceremony to award**  
**the insignia of the *Légion d'honneur***  
**to Baroness Tessa Blackstone**  
**on 7 June 2016, at the French Residence**

**Baroness Blackstone, *chère* Tessa,**

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

**We are gathered here tonight in the presence of your family, friends and colleagues, to recall the bonds uniting you to France, and to celebrate the ties you have always nurtured between our two countries.**

**Your family has had a perceptibly French feel to it since your childhood. Your mother was a model for one of the most ancient and prestigious designer houses: Worth, named after a British designer who settled in Paris and became the symbol of the *élégance parisienne* - counting Empress Eugénie as well as the famous Countess Greffulhe among his clients.**

**As an artist, your mother knew the merits of constant rigour and a strong work ethic. You've sometimes recalled how, on a peaceful stroll together, she made you recite what is a nightmare for so many children in our two countries: irregular French verbs.**

**Among them you certainly stumbled over *vaincre* - a verb which very fittingly describes you! In the wake of a referendum victory, you wasted no time in joining a political reform group at the highest level of government. Working on the Central Policy Review Staff, you advised the Cabinet Office for three years, bringing a fresh, audacious look to the British administration - some members of the Foreign Office still have memories of it, one of them describing you as a "dark-eyed evil genius"!**

**We all know that this description refers to a fearless, strong-minded visionary, driven by resolute principles. Those times also needed defiant figures to challenge discriminatory social pressures, and you braved them with**

the same sheer determination, making you a “brainy, blunt pioneer for working women”, as a Guardian literary critic wrote about you. Those two portraits are the two facets of your career: paving the way for future generations by shaking off the customs others would not dare to question.

Another verb you recited as a child describes the noble vocation you chose: *instruire*, to instruct. As a teacher you led your students to excellence, to the highest standards of knowledge, understanding and reasoning, helping them to flourish as you had previously done at the London School of Economics. Your experience as a teacher also taught you how to shape and implement consistent, clear-sighted policies in universities. This hands-on experience made you an exceptional leader of Birkbeck College and Greenwich University, and an outstanding Minister of State in a government whose priorities were famously listed as “education, education, education”.

**In these positions you continuously worked for broader, fairer access to education, striving to reduce inequalities between students as well as between universities, with a view to giving the United Kingdom a world-class education system, one which is attractive, inclusive and productive.**

**You gained the same thorough appreciation of the arts, from your part-time student job as an usher, to being a member of the Royal Opera House's Board of Trustees, and eventually as a Minister of State for the Arts. Thanks to your remarkable accomplishments, you are not only one of Britain's most influential cultural figures, but also a prominent advocate for the international circulation of art and knowledge.**

**"Lead" is an English verb not so easy to translate, so I will be brief and just say that your natural authority and competence also influenced major intellectual institutions such as the Fabian Society and the Institute for Public Policy Research to choose you as their chair.**

**And let me mention another verb, also irregular but French this time: *Joindre*, to link, to bond. Throughout your career you've highlighted the fundamental importance of foreign students' presence in British universities; you've supported closer partnerships with European institutions; and you've helped deepen the connections between our countries.**

**These links finally led to you chairing the Franco-British Council. You have done so for more than two years now with great dedication, fabulous enthusiasm and outright rigour. You have constantly encouraged the Council to demonstrate the exceptional richness of our bilateral relationship in many innovative ways, transcending the framework of interstate relations.**

**The French Republic wishes to thank you for your commitment to constantly strengthening the cultural bonds uniting France and the United Kingdom.**

**We are witnessing times of great uncertainty in terms of the future of Britain's relations with its neighbours. But amid these doubts and expectations, the Franco-British Council is confidently forward-looking, benefiting from your lengthy experience, your dedication to excellence and your forceful determination to open up new possibilities and broaden our nations' horizons.**

**Under your guidance, the Franco-British Council has entered a new era. At its heart lies a major initiative announced at the last Franco-British summit in March by David Cameron and François Hollande: the launch of a Young Leaders programme.**

**This programme is fundamental – and I know we share this belief. It aims to invest in the Franco-British bilateral relationship and increase mutual understanding by influencing opinion-makers aged between thirty and forty, from a range of sectors, to strengthen and broaden the relations between our two countries.**

**Our countries are very close, that is understood; their strategic, economic and cultural proximity is probably without equal in the world; but it is a mistake to take the Franco-British relationship for granted. Thanks to the renewed dedication of inspiring and dedicated figures like you, it is a stimulating and fruitful bond, attractive enough to convince youngsters to engage – and I know you have done a lot in that regard.**

***Chère Tessa, today, together with your colleagues and friends, I am very happy to be honouring you for the major part you have played and continue to play in the Franco-British relationship. No doubt it will also be celebrated in your fiefdom of Bonnieux, which I understand you set your heart on long ago! Et j’imagine qu’il vous le rend bien!***

***Baroness Blackstone, au nom du Président de la République et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Chevalier de l’Ordre National de la Légion d’Honneur.***