



# Ambassador's Activities

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Speech by *HE* Bernard Emié,  
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

"Franco-British Connections" seminar :  
*How can Britain and France's parliaments effectively promote university  
cooperation between the two countries ?*

House of Lords, 8 December 2011

Lord Speaker,  
Baroness Quin,  
Lord Grenfell,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all I'd like to thank and congratulate the organizers of this meeting for gathering together, in the House of Lords today, such a large number of French and British elected representatives, academics, young professionals, students and civil servants to discuss ways of developing our academic partnerships.

Thank you for inviting me to join you, and although I've come to share a few personal thoughts, I'm here above all to listen to you and to assure you that I'm fully open to supporting your initiatives.

I hope the debate that follows – and I invite the students here to participate actively in it – will be a source of inspiration and enable us to draw conclusions, which I shall be happy to pass on to the relevant French authorities.

### **1) Civil society structures have a full role to play in Franco-British cooperation**

Franco-British cooperation isn't a matter for governments alone. If any demonstration of that were needed, you've just heard it in the speeches preceding my own.

The civil societies of France and Britain are closely intertwined: 3 to 400,000 French people live in the United Kingdom and as many Britons in France. Each contributes in their own way, in their own field, to the vitality of our bilateral relations. But how can we ensure those relations are organized and coherent?

In particular, we need a few relevant structures to enhance Franco-British cooperation, help people understand our respective traits and foster Franco-British consensus on the great political issues of tomorrow.

We've just been introduced to some of the most important ones: the Franco-British Council – with its active British and French sections, the latter having just elected a new President, the professor of economics, Christian de Boissieu – , the Franco-British Society, and The Franco-British Connections, which has invited us this evening and which promotes Franco-British partnerships between universities and *grandes écoles*. It mirrors the bilateral relationship between our two countries: dynamic, flourishing and full of promise.

Our two countries face the same challenge: how can we adapt in the face of international competition? How can we be as attractive as possible? How can we play an active role in the momentous changes taking place around the world? To be competitive, it's in our interest to combine our efforts to achieve the necessary critical mass. We must make the most of our complementary traits. Furthermore, we observe one another. We compare ourselves to each other. We change our behaviour by learning from the good practice we see on the other side of the Channel. We must bring our systems closer together, make them more compatible and thus lay the foundations for even closer cooperation.

I've been asked to talk about Franco-British academic cooperation. It's an area of great potential. It seems to me to symbolize the closer ties being forged between our civil societies and our institutions.

More precisely, the development of the French legislative framework for higher education is both an inspiring example of good practice and an opportunity to develop exchanges between our civil societies.

## **2) The development of the French university landscape is an opportunity**

The Franco-British Connections brings together the cream of our institutions. I'm delighted with the exchanges between our most prestigious universities and *grandes écoles*, but I want to remind you that the positive dynamic in the Franco-British relationship at university level isn't confined to these: it must involve all our universities.

This dynamic is facilitated by the new freedom granted to all the French universities through the reforms introduced by the Universities' Freedom and Responsibilities Act of 10 August 2007. They now have an autonomy that our *grandes écoles* already enjoyed and which has succeeded so well for them. It has enabled them to become international institutions in what has become a veritable market, and an ever more competitive one.

For example, you may have noticed this week that the Financial Times put two French institutions (1) in first and second place in its European business school ranking.

Today we can appreciate the effects of the reform begun by President Sarkozy in 2007. Allow me to say a few words for our British friends about this change in the legislative framework of French higher education.

As a result of the Act of 10 August 2007, higher education and research in France is now characterized by great autonomy in relation to the state in terms of statutes, financing and management. This system will continue to grow stronger. So in 2013, universities will be able to own their property and manage it in their best interests. Universities' budgets will now be able to receive

private funding. Ultimately, autonomy will include responsibility for a university policy that defines training, research and professional qualifications.

In short, this reform passed by our parliament brings the French system closer to the system that gives the great British universities their global reach. It should therefore, logically, make it easier for us to develop our partnerships.

Let me add that this Act is accompanied by a series of measures aimed at improving certain French universities, like the Plan Campus to modernize the universities, as well as the creation of the *Pôles de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur* (PRES), groupings of universities, *grandes écoles* and specialist schools. These centres enable the institutions to give their harmonize their systems and pool their activities and resources: 24 such centres were established in 2011. In short, we now have the means to be better, more autonomous, more successful – and carry more of a punch, too, at international level – by virtue of the choices made by each university.

### **3) State-to-state relations and university cooperation**

One of the most enriching and gratifying aspects of my mission as Ambassador in London is precisely to represent France in a country that is home to world-class universities. And I'm talking not only about the key centres of Oxford, Cambridge and London but also universities like Leeds and Edinburgh, where I was delighted to meet students and teachers during recent visits.

I'm struck by the very high quality of institutions sometimes less well known to the French general public but whose academic staff demonstrate remarkable dynamism, in addition to the extraordinary calibre and diversity of the students. I know how advantageous it is for our university institutions to continue

developing their already very substantive exchanges with these great “European” universities. Moreover, those French students who come to study in the UK, on exchanges or otherwise – and there are so many of them – make the right choice.

My regret, of course, is that there is such a lack of balance in those exchanges. Nearly 3,500 French students a year stay in the UK under the Erasmus programme and 14,000 study in the UK by registering directly with British universities. Obviously, British students travel in the opposite direction, going to study in the French higher education system. But their numbers are only in the order of 3,000 per year, which is far from enough.

Too few Britons study in France, and an initiative like yours today must be a chance to find ways of correcting this imbalance. True, there are excellent courses in our *grandes écoles* that are taught entirely in English, but I’m aware that inadequate knowledge of French is a real handicap. And since 2004, learning a foreign language in England has no longer been obligatory beyond the age of 14. I’m pleased to know that the current government hopes to change this system, which holds your country back.

To plug this gap, we must intervene very early. That’s why France is committed to encouraging the teaching of French in the British education system.

A few weeks ago, on behalf of the French Education Minister, I signed with Michael Gove an agreement on education cooperation between France and England. This agreement enhances the role not only of French teaching throughout the whole English education system, but also the teaching of subjects such as history and mathematics in French. In this way we hope to prepare young Britons, a few years down the line, to take part in exchanges with French

higher education establishments and do work placements in companies in France. But it will take time for these efforts to pay off.

This issue was at the heart of my meeting in Scotland in October with the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs, and it's something I'd like to highlight here to the parliamentary representatives taking part in our proceedings this evening, because I'm sure you're aware that a political choice to sacrifice foreign language teaching will cut off your future researchers from all research in languages other than English, and your future decision-makers will be deprived of numerous opportunities to work in neighbouring European countries, your leading trade partners.

## **Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Never have Franco-British relations been closer. Never have they been quite so deeply rooted in concrete cooperation projects. Never have they played such an important part in framing our two countries' policies. I'm thinking of the defence sector, where two treaties signed at Lancaster House last year commit us to cooperating together over the next few decades. I'm thinking of energy security and the United Kingdom and France's joint commitment to maintaining an energy mix in which civilian nuclear energy has its full place. I'm thinking of how we respond jointly to international crises – be it in Libya, Iran or Syria – and of the shared initiatives the UK and France are promoting as permanent members of the Security Council.

Our closer cooperation stems from our two governments' political will. But we know that it is also a result of the close links between our civil societies. The higher education sector provides a good example of how intertwined our

societies are. Developing these links in all fields of knowledge – from the humanities to science and technology – should be a constant concern. Our countries are duty-bound to create the right conditions for this to happen, and it's in their interest to do so.

I'd like to thank The Franco-British Connections for organizing this meeting between us this evening. I pay tribute to the role it plays and to its chairman, David Wahl, in fostering these discussions and the initiatives between French and British higher-education establishments. I'd also like to thank Lord Grenfell for urging us to highlight the important contribution of parliament to Franco-British cooperation in this area.

The Franco-British friendship groups of the National Assembly and Senate, and the British parliament's All-Party Group on France have given their work a new boost, resuming their discussions in June after several years' interruption.

They are natural partners when it comes to supporting closer Franco-British ties and exerting pressure to overcome the legal and regulatory obstacles to closer cooperation.

When they discuss policies and resources, I very much hope that all the members of our parliaments will constantly keep in mind the hopes of generations of students who reach higher education.

**Thank you.**

(1) HEC Paris and INSEAD.