



Ambassador's Activities

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

at the General Assembly
of the French Chambers of Commerce in Great Britain

Thursday, 12 May 2011

Mr President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great pleasure for me to meet, today, members of the French Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain, a month after I took up my post as French Ambassador in London; I've already had the opportunity to speak to your President, M. Arnaud Vaissié. Forgive me for arriving late, but I've just come from Canary Wharf, where I was with Economy, Finance and Industry Minister Christine Lagarde and Chancellor George Osborne for the inauguration of the Fitch ratings agency's headquarters.

It's a privilege to be taking up my duties in Britain at a time when our relations are in very good shape overall. We haven't been this close for a very long time. Since President Sarkozy's State visit in March 2008, the relationship has grown stronger, and we've worked in harmony to provide an ambitious response to the financial crisis. This joint work was speeded up after the change of government in May 2010 and the arrival on the scene of Prime Minister David Cameron, who, let's remember, visited our country on his first trip abroad.

These stronger ties between our two countries were later marked politically by the signature of two defence agreements in November 2010, representing another milestone in our long-term trust. This extraordinary dynamism in our relations is also reflected in the economic and financial sphere, and I'm aware of your commitment, your history, your effectiveness and the dynamism of this Chamber.

This Chamber of Commerce has existed in the United Kingdom since 1883, making it the oldest chamber of commerce in the country.

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King Edward VII wasn't mistaken when he said in his speech to the British Chamber of Commerce in Paris in 1903: "The days of conflict between the two countries are (...) happily over, and I hope that future historians (...) may be able to record only a friendly rivalry in the field of commercial and industrial developments, and that in the future, as in the past, England and France may be regarded as the champions and pioneers of peaceful progress and civilization." The King concluded: "There are no two countries in the world whose mutual prosperity is more dependent on each other."

Between 1900 and today everything has changed, but nothing is really different. In 1900, France was the third largest supplier to the United Kingdom and her fourth biggest export market. Today France is her fifth largest supplier (7% of British imports) and still ranks as her fourth destination in the world and top destination in Europe. The UK is France's fifth largest customer and seventh supplier. Our countries are comparable in the size of their economies, their development, population and international influence – the world's fifth and sixth largest economies and permanent members of the Security Council.

The French Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain is still the principal foreign chamber of commerce in the UK, strengthened by the dynamism of its 600 member companies. Thanks to French and British entrepreneurs – thanks to you – the wish expressed in 1948 by M. Court, then President of this Chamber, that "the Channel should cease to be a bleak, grey barrier" and become "a bright and busy thoroughfare" is now a reality.

The strength of our trade relations owes a lot to the vitality of the partnerships between our businesses in sectors as varied as defence, energy, the environment, construction and infrastructure. The number of jobs created is considerable.

More than 1,600 French companies in the UK employ over 450,000 people, and 2,350 British firms provide work for more than 250,000 people in France.

The commercial dynamism to which the French Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain contributes is all the more important because France and the UK are – like most of the world’s economies – still recovering after the unprecedented financial crisis we’ve just experienced.

Both our countries are navigating in uncertain economic conditions, with growth in particular not expected to rise above 2% in either France or the UK this year, and in the especially harsh context of the massive budgetary restructuring that all the European countries – and our two countries in particular – have pledged to implement in order to return to sustainable debt and deficit levels. And all this amid the sovereign debt crisis in the Euro Area: with 48% of British exports bound for that area, the United Kingdom can’t remain indifferent to what’s going on there.

Like the French EU presidency in 2008 and the British G20 presidency in 2009, the French presidency of the G8 and G20 in 2011 provides a special opportunity to work together on the search for long-term solutions, while reinforcing our shared ambition on the international stage.

It’s in this spirit that we’re working hand in hand to define the objectives, whether it be reforming the international monetary system or improving global governance, a subject on which President Sarkozy has entrusted David Cameron with a special mission.

In this context, continuing and strengthening our industrial partnerships is essential to relaunching our economies. These exchanges must endure. These exchanges must be stepped up.

Our cooperation in the defence sector was strengthened by the signature, on 2 November last year, of two historic treaties that offer opportunities for our businesses in that sector. SAFRAN, EADS and THALES have all invested in the UK and become British. BAE and Dassault cooperate particularly on drones. Gérard Longuet, Minister for Defence, restated this possible way forward on Monday with his British opposite number, Liam Fox.

In the new context created by the tragic tsunami in Japan in March, energy remains an essential field of strategic cooperation between our two countries, with – among others – EDF Energy, the main electricity producer in the UK.

More than ever, our two countries are going to be a driving force in the use and development of civilian nuclear energy, and our intention both bilaterally and in Europe is to further that ambition, in a context where we also want to strengthen the safety of our nuclear plants.

Other industries – for example, environmental services, construction and infrastructure – are essential for stimulating our economies, especially in terms of jobs. “Veolia Environnement” employs over 16,500 people in the cleaning, water and energy services industry, thus forming part of the UK’s commitment to sustainable development. Saint-Gobain, which accounts for 16,500 jobs in the UK and Ireland, is also using its expertise to achieve sustainable development by helping construct “greener” buildings. Bouygues and Vinci, both players in the construction and infrastructure industries, together employ more than 7,000 people.

However, it is, of course, the important fabric of British and French SMEs which underpins our economic relationship. The French Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain provides essential support for their development and internationalization, helping to stimulate our economies.

More than ever, France is giving absolute priority to investment and foreign trade to ensure development drives our growth further. Our British friends are doing the same, with trade a major priority of their foreign policy. So together we must keep this priority in mind. Like my predecessor, I intend to help you in any way I can and respond to anything you may ask. But I also intend to call upon you as part of France's export and bilateral trade team in the UK, represented by our rich economic fabric in this country, strong cross-investment, dynamic French foreign trade advisors and the commitment of the regional economic services, UbiFrance, the "Invest in France" agency, Atout France and of all those whose goal here is to ensure that our already outstanding trade is even stronger in the coming years. Armed with this ambition, which Christine Lagarde restated today in London, I want to tell you right from the start how much I admire the work achieved and what confidence I have in your work and our cooperation in the future./.