

Speech: Trade and continued cooperation between France and the UK

Good morning.

I am delighted to be here today to address the members of the oldest British Chambers of Commerce in Europe, and the oldest such chamber in France.

When I became Secretary of State for International Trade, I was also made President of the Board of Trade. As the holder of an office that dates back to 1672, it is not surprising to me that our ancient institutions are still invaluable in addressing the most cutting-edge trade issues!

Mon message aujourd'hui est clair – La Grande-Bretagne et la France partagent un relation inébranlable.

Given the sometimes tumultuous history of our 2 nations, I suspect those words have not been uttered many times before, and certainly not in French, by a full-blooded Scot representing an English constituency!

Mon père était un professeur de langue française quand j'étais jeune. Ceci explique non seulement pourquoi je parle Français avec l'accent écossais, mais également la connexion que je ressens avec la France, et avec l'Europe.

For me, childhood holidays did not mean Cornwall or the Western Isles, but summer in Orange.

I actually became engaged to my wife in the picturesque setting of Carcassonne.

My own experience is just one example of the strong personal bonds that unite Britain and France.

Over 400,000 French citizens live in London alone, making it the equivalent of France's sixth largest city.

One area, South Kensington, is sometimes referred to as the 21st Arrondissement of Paris!

It may seem flippant, but it illustrates the closeness of our relationship, built upon the ties of history, defence, and of course, trade and industry.

France is Britain's third largest export partner, conducting trade worth £69 billion each year.

France is also Britain's largest European foreign investor. My department estimates that around 5,000 firms are investing across the channel in both directions, supporting over half a million jobs.

It is a commercial partnership that continues to go from strength to

strength. When firms approach my department for advice on exporting, France is consistently the most popular destination behind the US.

It is no wonder that your own Chambers currently boast over 700 members.

For centuries, cross-channel trade has been a cornerstone of the European economy.

It is a source of great pride within my Department that Britain and France were the first 2 nations on earth to sign a free trade agreement.

In 1860, 2 of Europe's leading economists, Michel Chevalier and Richard Cobden, met in secret to negotiate the lifting of tariffs on raw materials, food and drink between the 2 countries.

Although the treaty lasted only 30 years, its effects can be seen to this day. The British addiction to French wine is matched only by the French love of whisky. This country consumes more per head than any other nation on earth.

For all the closeness of our nations, I cannot come here today without addressing the fact that, politically, the United Kingdom has chosen a different path to the one we have followed for the past 40 years.

I must stress, however, that Britain's decision to leave the European Union was in no way a rejection of Europe, our European partners, or the values that we share.

It was a decision that said increasing European political union was not the direction for us, and we understand that there is a negotiation ahead of us following our decision to leave.

But ours was a vote to ensure that we can embrace a wider world, trade freely across the globe, and determine our own destiny, while at the same time ensuring that our relationships with European partners remain as close as possible.

There will be no abdication of our international responsibilities. The UK has always been an open, globalised nation. We will always continue to welcome talent from across France, Europe and the world.

We will always welcome businesses or investment to our shores.

And we will always maintain a commitment to our close friends and allies in Europe.

Politically and militarily, we will continue to work together to face our common threats. As Secretary of State for Defence, I worked on the 2010 Lancaster House Treaty.

This agreement has allowed us to develop co-operation between British and French Armed Forces, the sharing and pooling of materials and equipment including through mutual interdependence, the building of joint facilities,

mutual access to each other's defence markets, and industrial and technological co-operation. Sovereign nation, to sovereign nation.

I would like to see that declaration between our 2 countries honoured in the future.

Economically, the UK will remain committed to the values of free and open trade. The British government has no interest in erecting barriers where none yet exist. It is in all our interests to maintain the freest possible trade between Britain and the European Union, just as it is in Britain's interests to see the EU succeed.

We desire nothing more than a strong, secure and prosperous partner in Europe.

Whilst we remain within the EU, we will continue to work tirelessly towards those free trade agreements and preferences that are under negotiation.

We recognise the vast benefits that free trade brings, not only to large economies such as Britain and France, but to smaller developing nations across the world to which free trade offers an escape from poverty.

This year marks 2 centuries since David Ricardo introduced his Theory of Comparative Advantage. The experience of globalisation, and of technological advances unimaginable in Ricardo's time, have only served to validate his theory.

Free trade is an unalloyed force for good in the world, a system that spreads prosperity amongst nations without detriment.

The United Kingdom is committed to advancing the cause of free trade across the world, and as a government we reject any notion of restrictions to trade and commerce.

Yet promoting free trade is about more than international policy. It is about ensuring that businesses have the tools and the support they need to trade globally, and expand into new markets.

For all our devotion to commercial freedoms, the Department for International Trade recognises that it is not politicians, but businesses like yours that generate wealth and national income.

You are the drivers of prosperity. Without your drive and innovation, our work would be wasted.

My department stands ready to support you in all your endeavours. Whether it is finance, or advice, or local market knowledge, DIT has the tools available to help companies in France and around the world trade in the UK, as well as to help British companies sell overseas.

For over 140 years, the Franco-British Chamber of Commerce has been a stalwart of cross channel trade, industry, and relations. As Britain takes a new, global path, your work will be more vital than ever before.

It is 113 years since Britain and France signed the Entente Cordiale. In that time, our nations have been united by diplomacy, by defence, and finally by an emerging mutual prosperity.

We may be opening a new chapter in our history, but I am confident that it will be our most successful yet.

Thank you.