

20 September 2023 - Seul le prononcé fait foi

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TOAST BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC - State visit of King Charles III

Sire,
Your Majesty,
Prime Minister,
President of the Senate
President of the National Assembly,
Ministers,
Ambassadors,
National Assembly Deputies,
Senators,
Mayor,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The fact that you have chosen to visit France, in the very first months of your reign, is a show of friendship and trust that we value most highly, and which moves us deeply, both as a tribute to our past and a promise for our future.

We could not have received you anywhere else, in this setting that was a temple of the arts for the Grand Siècle, and which the Republic has made a temple of diplomatic friendship. The mirrors that reflect your image tonight in the past once reflected the face of Queen Victoria, of George VI and of Elizabeth II, and I would like to believe that, somehow, they are bearers of their memories. What is reflected today in this Galerie des Glaces is above all the powerful historic ties between our two countries, as ancestral and as precious as these walls – but vibrant, full of the life of those who weaved and made that history.

And at this moment I would like to pay tribute to she who fulfilled her mission with constant devotion, who forged modern Franco-British relations, who walked, for 70 years, alongside the giants of the century, whom she has re-joined. You know the affection the French people felt for Queen Elizabeth II, your mother, throughout her life and her reign, and how much they shared in the pain of the British people in grief. We think most deeply of her and of Prince Philip as we receive you tonight, with the Queen.

They have left you the legacy, beyond their immense example of rectitude and dedication, of their francophilia and intimate knowledge of our country, that you have adopted by visiting more than 30 places here: Font-de-Gaume, Fontevraud, Deauville, Reims, Bordeaux, Chenonceau and Colmar, everywhere where our history is intertwined – and it is intertwined everywhere.

Of course, our relations have not always been peaceful.

Yet this oscillation, this magnetic dance of to-ing and fro-ing, helped intertwine our destinies, our national prides, and tame the mutual fascinations, seen in the “French touch” and anglomania, to form fertile ground for emulation.

It proves that if there is a sentiment between our two countries that is hereditary, it is not hostility, but fascination.

For one has to admit, how could we fail to be charmed by the gathering, on one single British territory, of the Shakespeare’s language, of Brummell’s elegance, Locke’s Thought, of Churchill’s humour and of the music of the Beatles – or dare I say, the Rolling Stones?

You embody that unique alchemy, and you have helped to make the Entente Cordiale, of which we will celebrate the 120th anniversary next year, a tangible reality and a friendly proximity. You have never ceased to uphold the memory of its times of greatness, its times of pain and courage, from Verdun to Vimy, from the beaches of the landings, to Operation Dynamo.

In 1970, you represented Her Majesty Elizabeth II at the funeral of Charles de Gaulle. It was your first official journey, and it was to France. You were not yet 21 years old, but in the great nave of Notre-Dame, you paid the final tributes of your nation to him, in whom it believed when nobody believed in him, him with whom it formed an alliance, before even the French rallied behind him, him to whom Queen Elizabeth II once said that she saw him as “a part of the family”.

We will never forget that it is on your soil that the flame of the Resistance burned and stood as a beacon, that it is from your capital that General de Gaulle’s call was broadcast to French homes and fighters.

We will never forget everything the “army of the shadows” owed to its hosts in London. You are the bearer of this history’s memory.

Since 1904, our Entente Cordiale, desired by your ancestor Edward VII, has never ceased to grow and spread, in the course of a history that we have made our own: from the inauguration of the first Airbus to the opening of the Channel Tunnel, from European integration to our fundamental cooperation in the defence field, and the fruitful bilateral summits with your Prime Ministers, which are all essential chapters.

And despite Brexit, because what binds us together is so deeply rooted and because you are here today, Your Majesty, I know that we will continue together to write part of the future of our continent, to rise to challenges we face and spur on the causes we share.

France and the United Kingdom embody a secular democratic philosophy and a passion for art and knowledge that echoes from the Louvre to the Tate, from the cloisters of Oxford and Cambridge to the cupola of La Sorbonne.

We share an analysis of the challenges of our time, the same quest for scientific progress, which ranges from medical advances to the rise of artificial intelligence, the same will to defend the security of our Europe wherever it is challenged, as in Ukraine today, and the same commitment to fighting inequalities and to climate action.

We are driven by the same love of sport, the Olympic spirit, in which Paris is picking up the torch that London held so high.

Yes, when it comes to tennis, we prefer clay to grass.

Yes, while the recent discovery of an archive, which I will let our historians debate, appears to show that cricket was born in France, at the Château de Lièttres, in 1478, we can only admit that we have not necessarily benefited greatly from this parentage.

But that is no barrier to mutual emulation. And when your rugby players flatten the oval ball against French soil, French supporters cheer you on happily – so long as the try was not scored against our Bleus!

And were our States to forget this cultural fraternity we have forged, the convergence of destinies in the great challenges of the century, I know our peoples would be there to remind us, embodied by the artists who inspire one another, the young people who cross the Channel in one direction or another to study, helped notably by the generous scholarships of the British Council, and the hundreds of thousands of British people who have chosen to live in France, the very many French people who have gone the other way, weaving ties of grounding, exchange and culture across the sea.

For all of them, and for all of us, your rise to the throne is a promising one, and your choice of France for your state visit could not be more auspicious.

As your reign begins, you can count on the unwavering support and friendship of our country, in order to join forces for our peoples and humankind.

I therefore raise my glass in honour of Your Majesty, of Queen Camilla, and of your family.

I raise it in honour of the United Kingdom, and of the Entente Cordiale that unites our two fraternal peoples in an unwavering alliance.

Long live the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, long live Franco-British friendship!