

The Foundation for Science and Technology Christmas Reception

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Secretary of State for Higher Education and Research
Government of France

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Speech

Lord Selborne,
Dr Dougal Goodman,
Professors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, let me express my warm thanks to The Foundation for Science and Technology for its invitation to give a talk at its Christmas Reception. After the brilliant lecture that you gave, Professor Chris Whitty, on so challenging issues, my task will be hard!

My first message is that I feel very comfortable in this place! I had a look at the Events list on your website. At once I found a few key words, which are deeply related to my own concerns. Just to mention three recent debates you organized: “Delivering the industrial strategy – how can government promote growth?”, “What are the best ways to promote a culture of enterprise and innovation in Scotland?”, “An ageing population: meeting the challenge of caring for the rising number of dementia patients”. I could go on, but let me stop here.

Exchange of experience in transfer and innovation policies is the main goal of my visit. To-morrow I will meet my colleague David Willetts. I will also meet key-actors from various institutions in this domain.

So thank you for this timely opportunity to deliver a few messages on what is currently happening in France, especially since May.

In a very tough economic context, the Government has decided, not only to preserve, but to increase, by two point two per cent the budget of my ministry! I could not have hoped any best signal!

Like the UK, France is at the very top-level of scientific production.

So, why do we need to change?

Because, contrary to the UK, **the economic impact of French Science has not yet reached the expected level:** filing patents, private investment in R&D, the desire for undertaking, our young scientists’ entrepreneurship spirit, the growth of innovative spin-off companies stemming out from our research labs, all those factors must be improved!

In addition, even though France is the second financial contributor (sixteen point four percent) to **the framework program**, France stays far behind Germany, at the third rank in terms of “financial return”. **My priority is to improve these results!** It is not only for a financial purpose: the real issue is a better achievement of the European research area! I have been

personally very much committed in the support of the “simplification package”, approved by the competitiveness Council, on October 10. Thanks to this new approach, much progress will be achieved: more time for research, more transparency for budget rules, a shortened “time to grant contracts”, a decreased need for control. Our public laboratories and innovative SMEs will benefit from this simplified procedure.

So, improving the economic impact of R&D is a key concern for France. Our Prime Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, said during his general policy talk in the Parliament: “We have strong assets. I want to give a competitive advance to France in the field of new technologies, to create national and European champions.”

I am sure we all share here the conviction that, today, in advanced countries, there is no way to stimulate growth without a strong research and innovation policy.

How to promote those changes at a national level?

I do not trust a change through a dramatic revolution. Since the very beginning, as Minister for higher education and research, my method has been to dialog first:

A wide national consultation has been set-up for the last six months. It has been run by an independent Committee, chaired by Françoise Barré-Sinoussi, Medicine Nobel Prize in twenty eight. More than hundred interviews were performed. Twelve hundred written contributions have been sent. About five hundred meetings were held, involving about twenty thousand participants coming from all the French universities and research organizations.

After a two-day debate Session opened by the Prime Minister, the Committee is about to deliver a report to President François Hollande. It contains a limited list of tangible proposals.

What are the key axes I intend to promote? I would like to briefly draw the main actions and principles we are aiming at. I know they are already familiar to you.

Our strategy has to be more integrated within the European Union policy, based on innovation, competitiveness and growth.

To train high-skilled young people, so that the employability increases, is not only a social obligation. It is also a prerequisite for the competitiveness and growth of our countries. The success of students, of all students, at the early steps of university courses is a priority. We must simplify and make the higher education system more readable, for French as well as for foreign students, and for employers!

The Prime Minister has asked me to move towards a strategic research agenda. It aims to tackle growth and competitiveness, as well major societal challenges.

The excellence of research must be encouraged. Frontier research must be kept breathing. The budget of the French research councils has been increased. In addition, fifty percent of the budget of the National Research Agency is devoted to science-driven programs. Moreover, I have just asked this agency to accompany the awardees of our young researcher national program to apply to ERC starting grants by the end of their contract.

Today’s global challenges - from climate change to unemployment - are both economic and social. The world demographic and economic growth means to face huge societal challenges in terms of energy, climate, global health but also wealth inequality. The persisting economic crisis we are facing reminds us of the importance of relying on science, technology and innovation, not only for generating benefits but also in response to social and societal challenges.

I recently met Professor Aizawa in Japan. As Chief Science Advisor for the Japanese Prime Minister, he has been very much committed in the “Rebirth” plan which was set-up after Fukushima. It aims to tackle socioeconomic challenges like aging and energy transition. I was impressed by the major investment for R&D decided by the Japanese government, despite the economic context.

I am also convinced that all scientific disciplines have to work more and more together, with a focus on global societal issues. Today, interdisciplinary approach is an absolute necessity. Humanities and social sciences have to be fully committed in the research projects.

I am also promoting “Technological Research” that is considered too weak in France to stimulate partnerships with SME’s. I am fully convinced that we have the capacity to accelerate the transfer of knowledge into industrial products and services. I am promoting an important experimentation of new regional platforms, dedicated to “local” technological innovation, conducted by CEA Tech. Three new locations will be established in January 2013 in Nantes, Toulouse and Bordeaux, developing close links with local industry but also developing academic partnership with public labs and institutions. This has already been achieved in the Grenoble area and has generated an innovative ecosystem.

More globally, we have to make our transfer and innovation system more efficient in terms of economic impact. One key issue is related to SMEs, because they are more comfortable with disruptive innovation.

One month ago, I presented the framework of a new “Transfer Policy”, based on fifteen measures. These measures rely on four main axes: to develop the culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, to strengthen regional ecosystems for innovation, to reinforce efficient tools devoted to innovative SMEs, to boost spin-off companies stemming out from public research labs. For instance, the National Research Agency is about to fund new public-private labs, involving SMEs, as well as the French nodes of EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities.

The French innovation landscape should be structured by **the French competitiveness clusters**: more than seventy, including fifteen world-class clusters in key strategic fields, such as Aerospace, Healthcare and Biosciences, IT, Nanotechnologies, new materials. **World-leader companies, innovative SMEs and public research organizations** are involved in these clusters. After two 4-year phases, the French government currently investigates a third phase in order to switch from R&D concerns to economic growth concerns.

From my viewpoint, our ability to build these regional innovative ecosystems is the key issue. As the anatomy of the leading entrepreneurial regions shows us, the ingredients are well known: high-level universities and research labs, the access to public and private fundings, including venture capital and private equity, high-level tech transfer managers and, before all, the entrepreneurial spirit! This is strongly related with the vision of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology.

My very last message will be for Europe (even though I know that we are facing a tough debate within the EU at the global political level, with quite different visions)

The context for higher education and research in France has changed in recent years. Still, we must try to make our system more creative, more reactive and more open to European and international partnerships.

The best way to “achieve” the ERA is to build upon concrete actions and long-term trust and partnership. I have no doubt that at the scientific level, everyone is convinced. We must take advantage of our European position to set up high quality critical mass in order to compete as well as to cooperate with fast developing countries, for a mutual benefit.

In this context I would like to stress that the successful mastering and deployment of key enabling technologies by European industry, is a key factor in strengthening Europe competitiveness for growth and jobs. That is why I am fully supporting an integrated approach to the KET’s program. The European policy should then be deeply renewed in the forthcoming years in order to stimulate “Technology for growth” and “Innovation for growth” !

The ability of building a relevant and efficient research and innovation policy is a key issue for our countries. It is a challenging task because the times are changing! **This underlines the role of organizations like your Foundation for Science and Technology.** I have just mentioned the fifteen measures that define the new French transfer policy. Perhaps the most important one, is to build a Think Tank devoted to innovation, embedded within the research labs active in science for science and innovation, and able to produce policy notes. This motivates our deep interest in your Foundation!

As a conclusion, I hope I have made it clear that my priority is to enhance the presence of French research at the European level, for a better visibility at the international level, and continuing to weigh in the world stage of the nations of progress. As I said during my talk, our playground is Europe, to be able to address the worldwide competition to cope with. I hope we can move on together, with such a vision!

Ladies and gentlemen I am looking forward to sharing with you this Christmas reception Party, and I thank you for your attention!