

**Mr. John Spender,
Knight in the Order of the Legion d'Honneur**

Sydney, 30th of January 2013

Before I even begin my little speech, I am confronted with a serious challenge: how to address the person who is hosting us so kindly tonight? Should we address him as "Queen's Counsel", as "Member of the Federal Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia", or as "Mr. Ambassador"?

I think the easiest way is to say:

Dear John,

Few people have the opportunity and privilege, to live several lives in one lifetime. Several careers in one professional destiny. So many facets to such a rich and full life.

John, you're one of those happy few who have lived several lives in a lifetime. **As each has reached its maturity, they continue to live as intensely several lives at once.**

Reading your CV is impressive: you have lived at least three lives in one lifetime. Law, politics, diplomacy. And not to mention your fourth life: your personal and family life. I am fortunate tonight, thanks to your hospitality, to be able to get to know your family and friends.

We met a few weeks ago in Canberra and I am happy to see you again on this occasion for a ceremony that is always slightly special, sometimes a little emotional for it is not every day that one is awarded such a high distinction known throughout the world. Traditionally, in such circumstances, the speaker recalls the different stages of the recipient's career and paints a timeline. I want to proceed a little differently tonight and particularly highlight what I

think reflects your personality, through what I read about you and the discussions we had in Canberra. I would like to emphasise three points:

1 / A taste for challenge. You obviously enjoy a challenge and confronting difficult situations. You certainly could have settled for a brilliant career as a lawyer and legal adviser. You would have been among the biggest names in the profession in Australia. But politics has been one of your challenges. To serve as a politician is very demanding, in particular to have served for ten years, as was your case. To seek the majority vote of voters, to persuade them, to serve these voters requires exceptional qualities.

During these ten years, which were among the most intense of your career, you had countless responsibilities as Shadow Minister. I was very interested in particular to read that you were in charge of the promotion of women. Shadow Minister for the Status of Women. And it was probably one of your female colleagues who, at that time, was in charge of the portfolio for the status of men!

What I admire in your political career alongside great leaders of this country – I think particularly of John Howard who you told me had great influence on you - is the elegance of its closure. In 1990, thanks to the law of democracy, you were not re-elected and you decided to move on and leave politics. It is so hard for a politician to know when to withdraw and I would like to acknowledge the nobility of your decision. Politics is not a job, nor is it a profession, rather it is a commitment.

Your appetite for challenge brought you also to Paris – which I will come back to a little later- to represent Australia at one of the worst periods in our bilateral relationship, at a time when France resumed nuclear testing in the Pacific. But it is precisely because of this great challenge that you requested this difficult mission.

2 / A taste for compromise. Being Queen's Counsel, a Member of Parliament, let alone a diplomat, it is above all about seeking dialogue, the middle way, compromise. It is, in one word, having both a sense of equity and happy-medium. During our conversations, I strongly felt that this sense was one of your great assets, one of your sources of inspiration.

You spoke with great conviction and passion, about your current commitments: mediation and arbitration which even today continue to keep you extremely busy.

This has been, I believe, a constant in your career since your early years as a barrister in Sydney to the present day. This is still such a rare quality that it deserves to be emphasised.

3 / Your relationship with France. You will forgive me for taking a little longer on this point, but it is partly for this reason that we are gathered here this evening. Your relationship with France is not only limited to the four years you spent as Australian Ambassador in Paris. This too is also a constant in your personality: as a student at Yale University, you spent several weeks at *La Sorbonne*, and from there was born a long love story between yourself and France. Beyond your Francophilia, you are a remarkable French speaker; but rest assured, there will be no French language test before I award you the *Légion d'honneur*. You know my country's history admirably, its culture, classical authors as well as its geography. You have scoured my country, visiting towns and cities that I myself have never been to.

You explained to me the conditions under which you were appointed as Ambassador in Paris. Former Prime Minister John Howard simply asked you where you wished to be posted and you immediately answered "Paris". I must admit that this is a relatively simple procedure for managing human resources, both efficient and

effective; we should use it in France when we appoint our ambassadors.

As I said, you arrived in Paris in 1996 at one of the worst of times with a serious bilateral crisis underway as France resumed its nuclear tests in the Pacific. But as a man of courage and compromise, tirelessly, you re-wove the links, you restored the connections and you played a decisive role in the restoration of trust between our two countries. Next time we resume nuclear tests in your neighbourhood, we'll ask the Prime Minister of Australia to send you back to Paris.

From your time as Ambassador, you have kept numerous contacts in Paris and many friends. You left an indelible mark on your stay as it is thanks to you, and as a sign of renewed friendship between Paris and Canberra, that one of the main *places* of Paris was named "Promenade of Australia." For connoisseurs, it is a portion of the embankments along the Seine, between the Eiffel Tower and the Australian Embassy. Suffice to say the busiest place in Paris. And we owe it to John.

It is for all these reasons, dear John, that today France wishes to honour you. It is thus why, approximately two years ago, the French President decided to grant you the highest French decoration, the *Légion d'honneur*. I am fortunate that it was necessary to wait in order to award it to you, for it is my pleasure to be able to officiate this evening.

John Spender,

Au nom du Président de la République et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous faisons Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur.