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Diversity and Equality and the Future of Democracy

Rencontres Identités et Démocratie

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We live in a shrinking world. Until very recently the vast majority of people in the world spent their whole lives in one village, one town or one region. Today a large proportion of humanity is mobile, moving from country to city, from region to region and indeed country to country.

We live in a world that is much more interdependent than ever before. What is more nearly everyone is aware of this fact. International trade has gone on for millennia but only small parts of humanity were affected. Today the impact of global trade in goods and services, of international capital movements, of massive internal and international population shifts, and the pervasive presence of mass communications means everyone is affected, and has some knowledge of how and why they are affected by these transformations.

The power of technology to break down barriers and end the isolation of cultures is overwhelming. Nothing like this has been seen before, certainly not in terms of the scale and speed of change.

The internationalisation of the economy has transformed living conditions throughout the world. Clearly this globalisation has not benefited the world equally but there are large areas, and hundreds of millions of people who have seen their lives improved.

Our political systems have also been internationalised to an extent never seen before. All European states work together to further their common interests through organisations such as the European Union, the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Other regional organisations are emerging in Asia and Africa. The UN is quite rightly the focus of attention in its role as the protector of international law and international peace.

Our common humanity and common interests are more obvious and more important than ever before. At the same time, it is impossible to claim that the world is a more peaceful place. With the various conflicts around the world, and the present international crisis, it has been to be recognised that our interdependence is also a source of conflict.

Unfortunately, the more we know of each other, the more significant our differences seem to be.

I believe the task of 21st century politics is to ensure that our common interests prevail over our divergences. That can only be achieved if we face up to the reality of difference and diversity. Difference and diversity must be accepted as normal, legitimate and indeed a source of progress, creativity and richness. There is a crying need for institutions and practices that reconcile diversity and unity.

The challenge for the 21st century is to ensure that difference enhances humanity rather than destroys it. We know we have the technological means to destroy each other. But do we have the political means to use our technological sophistication to remove poverty, injustice, ignorance and disease.

I am optimistic that we can do so. The clash of civilisations is not inevitable. Indeed a civilisation of co-existence and co-operation is just as possible if that is what we decide.

I continue to believe that the pen is mightier than the sword, and that it should be employed to bring about peaceful relations between the peoples of the world. The choice between civilisation and barbarism remains as relevant and available today as it has been for our ancestors for thousands of years.

If we want to avoid barbarism, we must recognise, accept and celebrate the fact of human diversity. We are all different. We all have multiple economic, social, cultural and political identities. Some of these identities coincide, others are cross-cutting even within individuals.

Difference and diversity must be regarded as essential to life, not as a threat. Democratic politics in the 21st century must be about the search to promote ways of living together, not dying together. We must resist those who use difference as a method of generating hatred and violence, and as a way of perpetuating injustice.

But to do so is not just as a question of moral persuasion. The need to create political institutions at all levels capable of accommodating difference is crucial. This is no simple task. It involves hard thinking and talking, being prepared to take far-reaching and enlightened decisions, and basing institutions on reason rather than prejudice.

Democracy can only thrive in the 21st century if the issues of difference, identity and equality are addressed. It is not enough to recognise different identities, it is also essential to ensure that everyone has the same fundamental rights. A model of citizenship is necessary where your chances in life are not defined by your identity, whether this is based on culture, religion, ethnicity, nationality, or gender. There can be no discrimination based on your membership of a specific social group.

Fundamental rights must be guaranteed to all. I would include among these fundamental rights the right for your identity to be respected by political authorities and by your fellow citizens, the right to earn a living, the right to practice religion freely as well as the right to use your language. The European Convention on Human Rights has a profound influence that I hope will be reinforced by the eventual incorporation of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights into EU law. Indeed I believe one of the basic tasks of EU external policy for the forthcoming decades will be the export of these basic values.

At the same time, it is vital that identity is not used as an instrument of exclusion, neither by the powerful nor the weak. That would be a recipe for oppression or sterile opposition. Our continent has a long history of powerful states contesting other national or regional identities. We also have a long history of nationalist or separatist movements who exclude inconvenient groupings within their own societies from consideration. Neither exclusion

from above nor exclusion from below has worked, nor can it. Only a politics of inclusion, based on the accommodation of different identities can succeed. There can be no victories in a clash of identities, there can only be mutually acceptable respect and guarantees.

As I have said before, the world is a much more complex place than ever before. Our economies are interdependent and complex, so much so that detailed industrial and economic planning is a thing of the past. We have complex international frameworks for macroeconomic issues, such as the IMF, World Bank, European Central Bank, Bank for International Settlements, OECD, G7, etc. Clearly there is a long way to go before we have a coherent and representative democratic international economic order but we have already recognised the principle of and the need for such international institutions.

Our societies are also much more complex, with huge numbers of highly skilled and educated people. Our societies are also more diverse than ever before, ethnically, culturally, religiously and also in terms of choices of lifestyle.

The administration of society is also increasingly complex. There are large and extremely complex public and corporate bureaucracies who have a major impact on our lives.

But we still have a tendency to cling to simplistic political systems left over from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The traditional form of representative democracy is clearly not adequate to the needs of our complex world.

Democracy is absolutely vital to the health of our societies. I came into politics because we did not have a democracy in Northern Ireland. We did not have one person one vote. The right to vote is absolutely critical.

However, democracy is more than just about elections. It is more than just a matter of counting majorities and minorities. I believe an effective political system must command the consent of minorities just as much as it must be supported by the majority.

The traditional nation-state framework is no longer adequate. At one level, the nation-state is inadequate in the face of the challenges of an internationalised economy. The decline in voting turnout in many parts of the advanced world shows that many people do not believe that nation-states can guarantee economic security and progress.

At another level, the nation-state is too remote from the needs and aspirations of a diverse citizenry. It is important to respond to the differences within societies. And it is even more important to involve as many people as possible in the decision-process.

The 20th century can be seen as the history of political institutions that adapted society to their aims and objectives. I would hope that future historians describe the 21st century as one where we adapt our institutions to the

complexities and needs of advanced, diverse, educated and technologically sophisticated societies. For the first time in history, perhaps this will be the first century in which political institutions are designed to include rather than exclude from power.

Let us work for institutions that aim to represent all their citizens, not just a majority. Let us work for institutions that build from the ground up, from the communities and regions. Let us work for institutions that transcend the borders of the tired nation-state.

An indication of the possibilities is already present.

Look at the European Union. It is inclusive as every citizen of the European Union is represented in the Council of Ministers, the European Commission and the European Parliament.

It is based on the rule of law, and the recognition of fundamental human rights that transcend borders. It is based on the assumption that might is not right and on the pursuit of goals by exclusively peaceful means.

It respects diversity. Indeed that is its *raison d'être*. Bringing together the peoples of Europe in pursuit of their common interests in peace and prosperity, it presents no threat whatsoever. Indeed its existence has allowed for the much greater expression of different identities within Europe, and particularly within the member states.

This diversity is crucial to the functioning and existence of the European Union. Soon this diversity will be even greater as new member states from Eastern and Central Europe and the Mediterranean become members. I do believe that the concept of the Europe of the Regions will become a reality. We see this happening every day as regions become more active and accepted at European level. Even the most centralist governments realise that the overall prosperity of their countries is boosted by strong, dynamic, imaginative regional authorities in touch with their regional societies.

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The EU has also been a source of inspiration elsewhere. Africa is now proceeding to establish its own version of EU on a continental scale. Asian states are building their own institutions modelled on the EU. Latin America is following in the same vein with Mercosur. Indeed, more farseeing people in the Middle East have suggested the need for their own version as part of a settlement of the Israeli-Palestine conflict.

As a vehicle for addressing the problems of conflicting identities, of questions of war and peace, and of economic and social progress, the EU has been a tremendous inspiration to us in Ireland.

Our institutions as established by the votes of the people in the Good Friday Agreement referendum reflect the institutions and practices of the EU. We have an Assembly where all parties sit, an Executive which contains

representatives of all the major parties, and a North-South Council that brings together ministers from both parts of Ireland. There are power-sharing mechanisms to ensure that major decisions are taken with the consent of both major traditions.

Since the establishment of the institutions, much progress has been made in the regeneration of our society and our economy. Nobody has to surrender their identity while everyone has pledged to respect the identity of others. Clearly we have not created a utopia in Northern Ireland yet. But we are well on the way to reconciling different identities in a workable framework.

I believe that our experience suggests ways in which the demands of different identities, the increasing diversity and complexity of society, and the internationalisation of the economy can be reconciled in peaceful ways. There is an alternative to the path of violence and conflict. It is already there and visible. It is up to us to follow it, to reject the prophets of doom, and to create a civilisation of co-operation and coexistence.