Dr Anne Wibble Memorial Lecture

The importance and problems of political leadership

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April 10, 2003

We gather here today at a tumultuous time in international politics to honour a remarkable Swedish lady.

The former British Lord Chancellor, Lord Hailsham once said:

" Nobody, I think, who knows enough about politics really wants to be a leader; only a fool would want to stand in that position when you're exposed to the whims of fortune and chance and all the rest of it."

Fortunately that was not the view of Swedish leaders such as Bertil Ohlin whom I recall meeting once in the late 60's and his equally illustrious daughter Anne Wibble.

Dr Wibble undoubtedly inherited many of the intellectual and leadership characteristics of her father. Her strong views, dedication to public service and determination made her Sweden's first female Finance minister. She is a role model and a source of inspiration for women interested in politics and economics. The strong growth in the Swedish economy in the late 1990s had its foundations in Dr Wibble's budget austerity programme. The creation of an independent central bank and the de-regulation of the markets were initiated during her term of office and she was deeply involved in Sweden's entry into the European Union.

Of course, leadership involves taking knocks – and I've had my share – but it is also an opportunity to point a course, stamp a platform and gather others to your cause. There was never a greater need than today for international leadership of vision.

It was said of one of the American Presidential hopefuls who didn't make it that when he was at one of the many fundraising lunches for his campaign, waiters passed along the top table distributing one pat of butter to each plate. The aspirant asked if he could have two pats. 'No' was the reply: 'one for everybody'. 'I don't think you know who I am', he retorted: 'I am a candidate for the Presidency of the United States of America.' 'But', said the man, 'I don't think you know who I am either'. 'No, I don't know, who are you?' 'I am the man in charge of the butter.' It is the men and women in charge of the international butter rather than the wielders of power who are needed now.

President Roosevelt once said: "Governments can err, but better the occasional faults of a government that lives in a spirit of charity than the consistent omissions of government frozen in the ice of its own indifference."

I can think of no more apt description of the current international political scene than being "frozen in the ice of its own indifference" – indifferent to the missed opportunity of creating a democratic world order following the collapse of the Berlin wall, indifferent to the problems of global inequalities and poverty, indifferent to the environmental degradation of our planet, and indifferent to the proliferation of armaments, not just weapons of mass destruction.

Any new world order worth speaking of must depend on having a universally accepted international authority. For all its limitations all that we have is the United Nations Organisation, and we simply must build on that adapting its composition and rules as we go.

In reference to those who fear the loss of sovereignty, identity or national characteristics I quote Winston Churchill:

"It is said with truth that a policy of closer political unity involves some sacrifice or merger of national sovereignty. I prefer to regard it as the gradual assumption by all nations concerned of that larger sovereignty which can alone protect their diverse and distinctive characteristics and their national traditions."

The alternatives of one super power acting as world policeman beloved in concept by Richard Perle and other idealogues simply will not work. Historically all empires have crumbled eventually as people under their protection have sought to take charge of their own affairs. It was true of the Roman Empire, the Napoleonic Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire and the British Empire.

Moreover there is a real risk of a dangerous, and bigoted anti-Americanism sweeping parts of the world where the influence of the super-power is resented. At its extreme that manifests itself in the ghastly events of 9/11 and in the wholly indefensible suicide bombings against innocent citizens in Israel.

Only an international authority would, for example, be able to take a genuinely objective view of the Israel/Palestine conflict. Recently the British foreign secretary got into trouble for pointing out – quite correctly – that while we have been examining every dot and comma of 18 UN resolutions concerning Iraq to justify military action against the Saddam regime, we have behaved relatively inactively over the many more resolutions concerning the Israel/Palestine conflict.

I feel strongly about this because I was at the UN as a young MP in 1967 when resolution 242 was negotiated and adopted by the Security Council and has never been implemented. Not only has Israel failed to withdraw from the occupied territories, but she has continued to build settlements at an alarming rate and in defiance of the UN whilst we in Europe and the USA continue giving favourable trade conditions, aid and arms supplies to the Israeli government. The only Israeli government that took seriously the Palestinians' right to nationhood was that of Prime Minister Rabin whose assassination was therefore a global tragedy.

Jerusalem is a city sacred alike to Muslims, Jews and Christians which is why in any final settlement the only forces – military and police – stationed there should be those of a UN peacekeeping force.

The 1917 Balfour Declaration which established the state of Israel declared:

"it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."

We have forgotten that part which ought to be revived urgently as an international commitment and must certainly be part of the as yet unpublished road map.

Abba Eban who was Israel's first UN representative said after the 1967 war when he was his country's foreign minister:

"The Jewish people fail to understand that there was something contractual in our entry into the world. We promised to share the territory. The present position (that is occupation of the Palestinian territories) is a deviation from our birth. I never knew of a country that could successfully throw its birth certificate away."

Where are the comparable Israeli statesmen today? Not enough of the Jewish diaspora share the courage of the Commonwealth Chief Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks when he said: "there are things happening on a daily basis which make me feel very uncomfortable as a Jew."

The need for both sides to listen to the pain, and hear the narratives, of the other – applies directly to the conflict of Israelis and Palestinians.

The Chief Rabbi also said "There is no question that this kind of prolonged conflict, together with the absence of hope, generates hatreds and insensitivities that in the long run are corrupting to a culture."

Unfortunately Israel is held up in other parts of the world as a "democracy" amidst non democracies. That is why the tentative steps taken in a democratic direction in Jordan, Bahrain, Morocco, Oman and in Qatar are so important for the interests and image of the Arab world. Even the recent appointment of a woman minister in Oman is something of a breakthrough.

Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser once remarked that within post-independence Middle East politics there was "a role wandering aimlessly in search of a hero". We have recently witnessed the emergence of a charismatic but an evil hero – Osama bin Laden – and hope that soon we will be able to salute a decent hero in the Middle East. Its politicians and leaders must find the courage to change. What is needed now is a vision of a shared future, of a shared prosperity, of a shared confidence transcending the old fault lines of religious bigotry, racial prejudice, and half remembered wars. They must rise to the challenge of poverty, disenfranchisement, and fundamental extremism – the real modern-day threats to peace.

Some commentators have remarked that the current "civilizational clash" is not so much over Jesus, Confuscius, Krishna or Prophet Muhammad as it is over the unequal distribution of world power, wealth and influence, and the perceived historical lack of respect accorded to small states and peoples by larger ones.

If we do not act, in thirty years the inequities will be greater. With the population growing at 80 million a year, instead of 3 billion living on under $2 a day, it could be as high as 5 billion. In thirty years, the quality of our environment will be worse. Instead of 4% of tropical forests lost since Rio, it could be 24%. There are not two worlds, there is one world. We share the same world, and we share the same challenge. The fight against poverty is the fight for peace, security, sustainable growth and democracy for us all.

I served as a founding member of the board of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance in Stockholm. It has done excellent work, but veers too much to the academic, when what we really need is a united effort to assist the spread of democracy. Even in states such as Kenya and Malawi where the tyranny of one party rule has been rejected in favour of multi-partyism there has been a wholly inadequate follow-up in assisting the building of sustainable democratic party structures and enduring civic institutions. So much is done also on the fringes by bodies such as the Carter Centre, the British Westminster Foundation and the German political foundations, but we need a much more determined and co-ordinated international effort.

The same is true in establishing fair and stable terms of trade to help the less prosperous countries. That and debt relief from the past are more important than aid handouts which ought to be regarded as temporary and emergency measures only.

The recent flood of economic migrants into Western Europe, only a minority of whom are genuinely in need of asylum, is testimony to the need for establishing a more stable economic as well as political world order enabling people to pursue a decent livelihood in their own homes.

As we start the 21st century with all the advantages denied previous centuries of technology and communications, what we need is international leadership of vision, purpose and determination to establish a new and fairer world order. The possibility of achieving that is now upon us given the political will.

For the first time in our generation we have the means as politicians substantially to improve the lot of millions of our fellow citizens only if

we have the will to do so. Statesmen should not confine themselves to reacting to circumstances. They should have some vision of the way they wish the world to develop, and some capacity to move it in that direction.

The outstanding leaders in previous generations – Roosevelt, Churchill, Gandhi – had such a capacity to pursue a vision. In the present generation, Mikhail Gorbachev, Nelson Mandela and King Hussein have shown the same. But what of the coming generation? We need to look to people like Aung San Suu Kyi from Burma, someone yet unknown in China and a new leader in Israel to propel us forward into the new millennium.

President Clinton declared in his second inaugural address, "more people on this planet live under democracy than dictatorship". He is right in that 3.1 billion live in democracies, 2.66 billion do not. Today 118 of the world's 193 countries are democratic, a vast increase from even decades ago. So as we drew to the end of the last terrible century it appeared to be having a happy ending. As in those old silent movies, the maiden of democracy, bound by villains to the railway track, is rescued in the nick of time from the onrushing train. Both major ideological villains have vanished, fascism with a bang, communism with a whimper. But these ideologies sleep lightly and can easily be awakened. If liberal democracy fails in the 21st century, as it failed in much of the 20th, to construct a humane, responsive, inclusive, prosperous and peaceful world, it will awaken alternative creeds to substitute for fascism and communism.

One still has to question how deeply democracy has sunk roots in previously non-democratic countries. In too many countries, the poorest 10% of the population have less than 1% of the income, while the richest 20% enjoy over half. One hundred million people go hungry every day and 150 million never even get the chance – and girls are still only half as likely as boys – to go to school. What we are seeing in the world today is the tragedy of exclusion.

The "politics of exclusion" recognises an intrinsic relationship between democracy and the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs. To participate in the decision-making in a community, involves more than periodic elections. Elections alone do not constitute democracy, although they are an essential element in providing the people with an ordered framework of choice within which the governance of a country can be conducted. Democracy is certainly far more than the mere act of periodically casting a vote; it covers the entire process of participation by citizens in the political life of the country. In an age of images and symbols, elections are easy to capture on film but how do you televise the rule of law? There is life after elections.

The strength of democracy is its capacity for self-correction and the historian Lord Bryce has argued that no form of government needs great leaders so much as democracy. Yet even the greatest of democratic leaders lack the ability and charisma to usher violent, retrograde and intractable humankind into utopia. With the failures of the 20th century at the back of our minds we must ensure that our leaders in the 21st century must do a better job than we have done of making the world safe for democracy.

I have been asked to include some personal reflections on leadership in this lecture. So here goes! As a boy from the age of 11 to 15 I lived in the then colony of Kenya during the period of the Mau Mau uprising, when my father was minister of the Church of Scotland in East Africa.

What struck me then was the unnatural and iniquitous racial divide in education. All schools were divided into African, Indian, and European right up to within five years of independence at

which point we expected the incoming African government to run a multi-racial society!

That memory stayed with me in my student days when the anti-apartheid movement was formed following the Sharpeville massacre of 1959, and I became an early and active member, not realising that some seven years later I would be a Member of Parliament and become President of the movement in Britain.

My other political interest at university on which I regularly made debating speeches was the restoration of a domestic parliament for Scotland – a long standing plank of Liberal Party policy. You can imagine my satisfaction therefore last year when as Presiding Officer of the restored Scottish Parliament I introduced to the Members an old friend, now the President of a democratic South Africa. Not many people have that good fortune in a lifetime of politics.

That brings me to reflect in one aspect of leadership in politics that you will not find in the index of any book on political theory – that is the word "luck".

When I was a young prospective candidate for a hopeless constituency in Edinburgh, the candidate for the more hopeful constituency in the Scottish borders fell out with his local party and resigned. With a general election imminent I was moved into the vacancy. The election was then delayed to the last minute by the Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home, so I had nine months, not nine weeks to "nurse" the seat. In the general election of 1964 I narrowed the Conservative majority from 10,000 to 2,000.

So at 26 that was one piece of luck. The second, for me but not for the sitting Tory MP was that he died suddenly and unexpectedly a few weeks after the election, so a by-election was held three months later in March 1965.

My third piece of luck was that I had just started working in BBC television. Because of the by-election, they stopped my appearances but still under my contract had to pay me. So I became a full-time candidate for three months and duly won the by-election becoming the youngest Member of that parliament.

My next piece of luck in 1966 was winning third place in the annual ballot for private Members' bills. It is in fact simply a raffle – something we have avoided in the Scottish Parliament. Six MP's before me had over the previous fifteen years introduced bills to reform our criminal law on abortion. They had all failed through the opposition running them out of time.

But third place in the ballot meant there would be time and so I was able to pilot through a reform which has stood the test of time and been copied by many other countries.

Luck even played a part in my becoming leader of my party at the age of 37, because of the ill luck of the then leader getting involved in a messy court case and having to resign

Of course leadership comes into play when you have to decide what to do with your luck. My decision to move house from Edinburgh to a countryside I did not know; to take on a highly controversial piece of legislation with considerable unpleasantness even to this day, rather than something minor and safe; to stand for election as the first party leader in Britain to be elected by the mass membership not just the MPs – all these required decisive action.

But my most testing and risky moment came in 1970 when shortly before an election the all-white Springbok rugby team was to play a game in my rugby-devoted constituency. I had of course opposed the whole tour, but now it was on my doorstep and I had to protest against it. My majority in that election slumped to 500 after two re-counts. Good leadership demands never confining an individual's career within

the narrow pathways of party politics but by consistently putting principle before personal advantage in domestic and foreign affairs.

I have been impressed and motivated by so many ordinary people I have met in my travels - over 80 countries visited in my long life in politics. Whether listening to lifelong neighbours in the killing fields of Rwanda; long stream of expectant voters in the first democratic elections of South Africa, Namibia, Angola, & Mozambique; pleading mothers at Saddam Children's Hospital in Baghdad; dispossessed people in a favela in Ascuncion, refugees and victims of famine and war in Sudan and Somalia – I can go on and on. What is clear from listening to all these people is that people are the same wherever they are – here in this splendid room and across the world. We all want the best for our children and our families. We all want peace and personal security. We all want to live with dignity in a supportive community. We want equal opportunity for all. We have the strength, energy and enterprise. What people most want from their leaders is a stable political and economic framework that guarantees their personal freedoms and security so that they can go about living their lives in the manner of their choice.

Returning to our theme of this lecture there are several types of leaders with differing leadership styles. Two modern day leaders capture my imagination the most. The first, Aung San Suu Kyi is a mobilisation leader who mobilises her people against the most repressive military dictatorship in Burma. Her style of leadership is characterised by immense grace under powerful force.

The second leader is Nelson Mandela. He is a reconciliation leader who seeks areas of compromise and consensus from among disparate points of view. His style is patriarchal with a dash of humour.

Dr Anne Wibble was a leader worthy of recognition. Her impeccable academic credentials, her industriousness often at the cost of her sleep – as she used to say "cancel sleep" during times when deadlines had to be kept - were all characteristics of a leader in making whose life was so tragically cut short.