

SPEECH BY RECIPIENT SIR GRAHAM WATSON AT THE AWARD CEREMONY OF LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL'S *MEDAL OF LIBERALISM* AT THE HILTON HOTEL, SOFIA, BULGARIA ON 28 APRIL 2018

Dear Liberal International friends,

Thank you for honouring me with your Medal of Liberalism. And thank you for doing so at an event where there have been meetings not just of the Liberal International, but also of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, the regional Liberal grouping in which I have worked most.

My first Liberal International Congress was in Ottawa in 1979. I was about to become the Secretary General of the International Federation of Liberal and Radical Youth. Since then I have attended most LI Congresses; and many other LI events. I have had the honour to sit at the feet of many great Liberals. Giovanni Malagodi, Helen Suzman, Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Pierre Trudeau. And to work together with others, such as David Steel. With the Liberal International and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation I have fought for forty years for freedom. And I have always found among you kindred spirits in that fight.

In twenty years in the European Parliament, and seven years leading its Liberal Group, I strained to promote contact between European Liberals, and Liberals in Asia, Africa and Latin America. And in the four years I led the ALDE Party I tried to build beyond the national borders and the national nexus of politics which hampers human progress.

I have endeavoured to fulfil my duties to you, my fellow members in this great, generous, tolerant, inspiring and wonderfully untidy family to which we all belong. I suspect I am not renowned within our family for the virtue of modesty, but I am truly honoured by your appreciation.

*. *. *

I wonder if I might trespass on your good will and use this occasion to share with you some current thoughts about Liberalism. And about what I believe to be the greatest challenge we face.

*. *. *

Liberalism asserts that if you start with justice for the individual, justice for the group will follow. The converse is not true. Yet in other philosophies government starts with the collective and individual freedom is chained.

So the first and foremost duty of Liberals will always be to empower. A glance across our planet shows much we have empowered. More of our fellow human beings than ever before are empowered: with food and water, sanitation and education, and what Ralf Dahrendorf called *life chances*. Democracy and technology have spread the opportunity for participation and self-development. Opportunities for travel and communication and access to knowledge abound.

There is no room for complacency: Poverty, disease, and squalor still too often blight human lives, but we have made tremendous advances through Liberal ideas and the Liberal market economy.

Yet the progress of Liberal forms of government remains deeply disappointing. In the world's most populous country, China, autocracy pushes its roots ever deeper. In India, Hindu nationalism again rears its head. In Russia and Turkey, the aquifers of freedom are retreating. In Asia and Latin America, kleptocracy and corruption are common; and in some parts of Africa, banditry and armed conflict usurp the rule of law.

Here in the rich world, the generosity of the Liberal spirit is dissipated. America and Britain are in isolationist mood. In continental Europe the tapestry of good government is coming apart at the seams. War no longer seems unthinkable.

Across our planet, Liberals are on the defensive.

Why? The collapse of Soviet Communism in 1989 brought a huge peace dividend. But in China the communists hung on: and they continue to spread their influence. And in the USA the neoCons got cocky. They started talking of 'the victory of capitalism' or 'the end of history'. They claimed in the free market a moral value, rather than simply a mechanism to promote market exchange.

So, as Niall Ferguson observed, we splurged our peace dividend on twenty years of consumption, debt and speculation. In 2008 we had the financial hangover. Now we pay the political price.

The neoCons ignored the warning of Adam Smith: unfettered capitalism takes no prisoners and kills competition where it can. We need strong institutions to control it. And a *global* social contract to mitigate its depredation.

Liberals now have an arduous uphill struggle.

New nationalisms pull down the shutters on a global world view. Religious rigidity strikes at secular tolerance. It is harder to be a Liberal when prejudice fills the air.

Yet we live in a global village with a global marketplace. We need to foster a global culture, global governance and a global sense of human concern.

Here in the EU, in next year's European elections, the European Peoples Party will advance no answers to the global imperative. A mindset which mixes Orban and Kaczynski with the Vatican offers no hope to humankind.

And nor does the left. Socialists are on the slide because Karl Marx got it wrong. What stirs solidarity is not class consciousness. It is patriotism and kinship.

It took a Liberal, Woodrow Wilson, to understand that. 'Thou shalt not be ruled by foreigners'. Nowadays we must nurture a wider patriotism and a common citizenship. To

wrap a global cloak around the local, the regional and the national. To succour the supranational.

I come from a small island off the west coast of Scotland. In Glasgow, they say I'm from the islands. In Edinburgh, I'm from the west. To the English I'm from Scotland; to the Germans I'm a Brit. In Boston or Beijing I'm a European. In Jo'burg I'm a white man. I have no trouble with overlapping identity; a Liberal can wear all these labels. And he feels a commitment to his neighbours and a patriotism to all these communities. A Liberal is a global citizen.

It is here we must be active more. To develop in our compatriots and our children this sense of wider community. Because everyone can wear those labels. But not everybody understands the urgency of the common challenges. World population growth. Internationally organised crime. Climate change. Either we hang together to solve them or we most decidedly hang, separately.

We cannot live in hermetically sealed units. Human beings have a right to roam. We've done so since time immemorial. If it's us, we're 'explorers' or 'expatriates'. If it's them, too often they're called 'migrants' or 'asylum seekers'.

Such movement is not only natural. It is healthy. It spreads knowledge and ideas.

If it is greater than before it is because if we close our markets to products we will surely take the producers. If there is no hope at home, people vote with their feet.

Yet there can be no such thing as a clash of civilisations, because civilised people do not clash; they engage.

I hear a lot of talk about threats to identity. I would say just this.

Wherever we are, diversity is a reality. It is inclusion which is the choice.

And inclusion is no threat to identity. Indeed, a well rooted identity presupposes openness. If we can attract and develop the three T's – talent, technology and tolerance – we thrive. If we close ourselves to the world, like China after 1820, we wither.

Our Liberal friends in Canada have a good model for migration and integration. It is based on engagement, not on laissez-faire. They recognise the power of inclusiveness and celebrate the beauty of diversity. They promote dialogue to spread the balm of moderation over the wounds of prejudice. They work hard to get their young together. And Canada has one of the highest rates of mixed marriage: the ultimate integrator.

If Canada can do that, so can we.

There is an African proverb which holds that the best time to plant the tree was twenty years ago. And that the second best time is now.

* . * . *

This may sound un-PC, but I confess to having two poster pin-ups. Both Scandinavian women: and both European Commissioners. One is in charge of trade policy and the other in charge of competition. Cecilia Malmstrom takes on Trump; Margrethe Vestäger brings Amazon, Microsoft and Google to heel. There we see Liberalism making markets work!

Cecilia and Margrethe are not superheroes. They are Liberals with self-discipline and the courage of their convictions. Like Tsai Ing-wen, Alassane Ouattara and Xavier Bettel, the previous recipients of this prestigious award.

They are what we must all aspire to be.

I spend most of my time these days fighting Brexit. Because I will not watch as my life's work crumbles around me in my own community. As some of you know, I worked so hard that I ended up in hospital last year, fighting for my life. (Probably around the time I was nominated for this medal.) If I had lost that fight, I fear there would have been no posthumous medal of Liberalism for me. Because I instructed my wife that before they gave me the final rites she was to sign me up into the Conservative Party. I figured it was better that one of them should die than one of us.

In any case, I've bounced back. And I'm not done yet. So you may have to suffer me for another forty years.

Thank you!

ENDS