



NATO Foundation
Defense College



“Can an unstable World be made Safer?”

Speech in Memory of The Rt Hon Edward Heath
(Salisbury, 20th November 2019)

Rt Hon Lord Robertson of Port Ellen KT GCMG HonFRSE PC

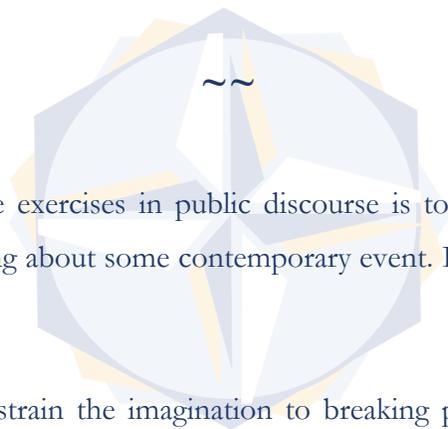
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Speeches in memory can often be taken as an ephemeral discourse on the state of world and human affairs through the lenses of the greatness of a past political figure. This speech has proven to be a valid occasion for reflection on the great political and strategic choices free people are facing, precisely because it went through the crucible of a pandemic that very few could foresee.

Still the need to confront the much more dangerous germs of polarisation, nationalism, xenophobia, nativism and fundamentalism is of paramount importance, as it is the imperative to modernise ageing institutions with real reforms that are not simplistic tweetable solutions.

It is with quiet confidence that the Foundation publishes the essence of the political thinking and action of its Honorary President in an ideal dialogue with a great British Conservative, that is an active and concrete testimony for farsighted and resolute politics.



One of the most unproductive exercises in public discourse is to speculate on what this or that deceased person would be saying about some contemporary event. It is a cliché too often worked to death.

And yet, and yet, it does not strain the imagination to breaking point to speculate on what Ted Heath would be making of what his Party is doing today on Brexit.

Outrage, dismay, confusion and seething anger; to claim that these might be his feelings at this moment is to be on reasonably safe ground.

Ted Heath was a European integrationist by conviction. His was not an ‘economics on the margin’ believer; his was a sincere belief that this country’s destiny, security and future prosperity was intimately involved in and bound up with the integration project of our nearest neighbours. He spent considerable political capital on delivering Britain to the European project – one which he saw as economically necessary and politically imperative.

I witnessed at close quarters Ted’s final parliamentary years. I was leading Labour’s lonely group of speakers on European affairs after 1983 in the dog days of Labour’s nervous breakdown (now being

replayed on an even grander scale). I watched the former Prime Minister smoulder and occasionally erupt in the interminable European debates. Even then the Eurosceptic cult was noisy and negative but fortunately at that time it was marginalised.

Not now.

Ted was not a naturally clubbable politician and hence political pond-life such as myself and my few front bench colleagues were not likely to be seen as soul mates of the great man.

But we could watch and spectate on his lasting, bruising battle with Mrs T. I recall that famous quote when he was asked why she so disliked him. He replied, 'I don't know, because I'm not a doctor'.

When I joined him much later as a fellow Distinguished Elder Brother at Trinity House he softened his approach and confided an occasional comment on the issues of the day. He was not a ray of sunshine on the issues of the day.

Ted had made entry to the then European Community a life mission. But it is worth remembering that he only got the trail-blazing European Communities Act of 1972 through the House of Commons with the help of Labour MPs, including John Smith and Roy Jenkins, who broke a three line whip to give it a majority of only 8.

He could not have delivered it with his own divided Party alone and knowing that, he reached out to the Opposition at the beginning of the process – his county mattered more than his party and that initiative led to the Labour rebellion which saved the Bill – and opened the manifest possibilities for Britain to develop and build its economy.

The Conservative Party has now exorcised the ghosts of Ted Heath and Margaret Thatcher side by side campaigning for Europe in the referendum of 1975. Airbrushed from the Party of Boris Johnson is a reputation for inclusive one-nation Conservatism and for genuine European collaboration as we head for another General Election likely to be as inconclusive as Ted's fatal one in 1974.

In the Tory Party, trashing Europe has gone from being a minority interest to an article of faith.

I can therefore, with some confidence, break my self-denying ordinance and presume that if there is a hereafter Ted will be boiling over at the destruction of his powerful legacy.

But 2109 has not only been dominated by the fiasco that is Brexit – the long journey out of the great European project. Four important and significant anniversaries have been commemorated this year as well.

75 years since the D-Day landings in 1944. 70 years since the foundation of NATO in 1949. 30 years since the Berlin Wall was breached in 1989

And, you may not have noticed but should have, the 70th Anniversary of the Publication of George Orwell's bleak but prophetic novel, 1984. Let me take them in turn because each has lessons for us today.

We watched earlier in the year the stark black and white images of the landing craft on the beaches of Normandy unloading their troops into the surf under a hail of German fire. Four thousand men were killed on these beaches on that very first day. Another six thousand were wounded, some terribly.

But had we the gift to have stopped these men on the beach and said to them 'Do you know that in exactly seventy five years' time in London at a NATO Summit one of the main preoccupations will be that the Germans are not sufficiently interested in the military?'

I venture to suggest that these men, and let it be said millions of their kind in generations before them, would have said, 'We'll take that. Please bring it on.'

Even as we are critical of Germany not spending its 2% of national wealth on defence let us keep in mind that former generations longed desperately for the day when the continent was at peace and the Germans did not like the military.

There is a huge war memorial at the Hyde Park Corner in London to the dead of the Royal Artillery in both wars. That one single part of the British Army, in which Ted Heath served, lost 49,000 men

in the First War with Germany and 29,000 in the second war with Germany. The inscription says simply, 'They died with the faith that the future of all mankind would benefit from their sacrifice'.

And that's what all these years of NATO and the European Union have done. To benefit a continent plagued down through the decades and the centuries with endless and bloody conquest and violence. And that achievement was also one of Ted Heath's abiding motivations – a continent whole, free and at peace.

His generation, who saw and prosecuted and were repelled by the War set about not only saying 'Never again' but actually established lasting institutions to ensure that it would never happen again.

The creation of that archipelago of multilateral organisations was their legacy to us. The UN, the EU, NATO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and more.

Lasting memorials to the fallen but building blocks of a saner, more collaborative, less nationalistic world. We inherited them; our legacy has to be their renewal.

And who would have thought that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation which I had the privilege of leading for part of its amazing 70 years could have survived and thrived for all that time. Its founding fathers (and of course they were all men) thought it only a temporary fix given Stalin's crushing road roller in Eastern Europe. They even included a ten year break point in the Treaty itself.

How would they have forecast that in London in ten days' time no less than 30 Heads of government would sit round the table of the North Atlantic Council and deliberate on the seven decades of cooperation, built on that remarkable Article 5 commitment to collective defence.

An attack on one country shall be seen as an attack on all countries.

The first Secretary General Lord Ismay, as he stepped down after his term of office ended was moved to say this in 1959.

“A defensive shield has been built up which, though not yet as strong as might be wished, is an essential feature of the deterrent to aggression. Who would have believed that sovereign States would entrust their precious armed forces to the command of nationals other than their own in time of peace? But this is what has come to pass.”

And here, decades later with this voluntary Alliance of free nations. Adapted to a very different world to 1949, but resilient, modernised and still unprecedented in both history and in geography

Ready to deal with the very different challenges of the next seven decades.

As I said, in two weeks’ time NATO Leaders will meet to mark the 70 years with a meeting in London. They can commend the way in which NATO has modernised, and grown in membership, in partnerships and in influence. They will know that more needs to be done to share burdens more equitably and to acquire the instruments of defence most suited to today’s threats.

But they also know that an Alliance of 30 nations committed to self-defence has unparalleled hard power at its disposal – and that that hard power is acknowledged and respected by current and future adversaries.

But hard power does not always mean real power.

Cowed by the hard power superiority of NATO, those who would challenge us get squeezed to the margins – to what has been referred to as the Grey Zone. Cyber-attack, interfering in elections, influencing political movements, licensing organised crime, encouraging corruption, penetrating key industrial and social players.

Our actual and potential adversaries know our weak spots, can see where free societies offer opportunities for mischief, spot and orchestrate the dissatisfied people who have become the casualties of dynamic economic change.

The unity of purpose which Lord Ismay spoke proudly of in the early days of NATO is still real but it always has to be worked on.

On 12 September 2001 I stood on a rostrum in the old NATO Headquarters building and, in the wake of the 9/11 attack of the day before invoked – for the first time ever - the Article 5 guarantee of solidarity. Eighteen nations said that in the face of the attack on New York and the Pentagon in America it had to be seen as an attack on every nation.

It was a signal to the American people of solidarity, it was an assertion of the power of Article 5 and it sent an unmistakable message to the criminal killers hiding in the caves of the Tora Bora mountains of Afghanistan.

And now, what of the thirty years from the breaching of the Berlin Wall – that breezeblock symbol of a weak and corrupt and ultimately doomed Communist experiment?

Those of us who witnessed the Wall in all its tawdry cruelty will never forget the misery and political failure it represented in the East of our rich continent. Its collapse was a turning point in our history and whatever we think about today's turbulent times, the world became a much better after that night in Berlin.

The problem is that since that remarkable event we have had what one commentator called a 'holiday from history'. We assumed optimistically at the time that the value sets established in the wake of a collapsed Communist ideology were welded permanently into our free societies. We cut our defence budgets and declared victory.

We just took it for granted that free speech, a free press, free elections, the rule of law, a mixed economy, the separation of church and state and a tolerance to minority opinion – the value-set of the West, would now be the norm. Maybe we were naïve or just careless. As the impossible became the inevitable and then became the indifferent, things began to slip.

A rise in populism and nationalism bred a new 'normal', challenging the normal we had embraced and celebrated. The appearance of authoritarian leaders and challenges to democratic institutions whether it be judges or media outlets or even versions of history became prevalent even in our own back yard.

The liberating influences of the World Wide Web to whom a remarkable 40% of the global population has access, has produced new vulnerabilities as well as new freedoms.

Our critical national infrastructure exists on a knife edge and is open to both state sponsored attack and individual interference. Our elections can be hacked into and influenced. Opinion can be manipulated and steered.

But much more importantly the rise of populism has liberated forces of negativity and cynicism we believed had gone for ever. The appearance of the organised far Right preying on immigration and national identity has begun to pollute our body politic. Our weaknesses and the cracks in our free societies are explored, and penetrated and exploited. Conspiracies are invented and magnified.

Discontent is harvested and slogans peddled as solutions to those actually are or believe they are, left behind. The manifest benefits of globalisation from which we have all benefitted are dismissed and denigrated as protectionism comes back into vogue.

Where does this all take us is a question on many lips. Up to now only the demagogues have the easy – but dangerous, response.

Which takes us to my final anniversary, that of George Orwell's incredible book '1984'.

The book, written on the island of Jura next to my native island of Islay, suffers today from being a set book in the English curriculum in schools. Hence it is read, if at all, as an obligation and not as a salutary and gritty warning of a world of horror but one which mirrors some societies alive and kicking in the world of 2019.

He wrote of a land where war is peace, where history is rewritten to satisfy today's opinion and not fact, the TV screen which watches you as you watch it and where truth is what Big Brother says even when it is manifestly untrue.

Are there echoes in today's world?

Orwell, who spent a night when writing the book, at our home in Port Ellen Police Station, painted a deliberately pessimistic picture of the future. It was meant as a warning from someone who had seen - and in Spain experienced, the signs of authoritarianism and the risks to the values we think as normal.

He pointed to the way in which technology and its commanding by unscrupulous leaders can eventually destroy our liberties and erode our democratic standards.

He may have got the date wrong but today he speaks to us, with Artificial Intelligence breaking new ground, with facial recognition on our streets, with the allegations of 'fake' news, attacks on the judiciary, manipulation of images and speech, cyber-attacks and those very TVs already looking at us as we look at them.

Orwell's prophesies and his warnings should have renewed potency.

But now to answer the question in my title.

Can we do anything to reverse these trends which have the potential to endanger and undermine our free societies as we come to the end of that holiday from history?

My answer? Only if we act decisively. And soon.

First of all, we have to ask ourselves if the modes of thinking and existing institutions of the normal times are fit for this new level of urgent change.

Surely we need a new agility and new imaginative flexible thinking to deal with today's emergency. Facing huge problems like climate change, migrations, extreme violence, terrorism, organised crime maybe peacetime modes of reaction are clearly insufficient. We need to be able to take risks, act quickly, spot opportunities and challenges with a rapidity common only in a wartime state. And yet are we not in what is near war with the velocity of change and the other serious challenges in front of us?

Second we need to reassert the values and sense of moral purpose which won us the Cold War. It was that, combined with defensive military might and unified resolve which dealt with yesterday's adversary.

Third, we must confront and call out the forces of extremism and disruption. The germs of polarisation, nationalism, xenophobia, nativism and fundamentalism infect many corners of our society and world. Too often we ignore them until they spill over onto our streets and often that is too late.

Fourth, there must be a modernisation of those now ageing institutions which have been the bedrock of our security for the last seventy and more years. Too often they are cast in the mould of post- Second World War and do not fairly represent a world changed out of all recognition. For many of them - often seen as slow, bureaucratic and out-of-touch, reform and redesign is politically difficult as nation states worry that, if they pull the thread, the jumper will unwind. The UN and its frozen Security Council membership is the classic example - hobbling a great and very necessary global organisation from handling today's multiple problems.

I faced that reform challenge when I took over at NATO - where I could do a deal with Presidents or Prime Ministers but not change the status of a gardener or shift a Euro from one budget to another. The shock of 9/11 however combined with the threat of seven new members arriving and overloading, allowed me to bully through some long desired and essential internal reforms.

Fifth, we need internationally to have new behaviour protocols for Artificial Intelligence, the use of offensive cyber, the digital battlefield and the militarisation of space and the Arctic. We need new and accepted global rules on asylum and migrants and tougher rules on organised crime and corruption. In all these areas there is a desperate need for Geneva Convention type laws to try to codify what behaviour is approved or outlawed.

Sixth, we need to end the drift away from professional diplomacy. A belief has grown up that because we have so much information available from so many sources we can do with fewer diplomats and diplomatic processes. That is precisely the opposite lesson to draw from today's information overload.

The ability to sort the truth from the misinformation, and the reality from the noise is not given to the man or woman in the street. And yet his or her security and safety depends on someone identifying real situations and then making decisions or offering advice based on an expert analysis.

Constant cuts in diplomatic budgets rob us of the informed assessments on which wise decisions can be made. The fruits of this budget vandalism will not be obvious in the short term but as time goes on, as a country and as a world, we will find we are poorer and more at risk.

Seventh, we need to be prepared for the unexpected. We are constantly taken aback by surprises - the invasion of the Falklands and of Kuwait, the breaching of the Berlin Wall, events on 9/11, the tsunamis in South East Asia and many more' out of the blue incidents. We need to have available always a toolkit of diplomacy, armed force and aid packages to deal with what comes next out of the blue.

These then are my seven but not exhaustive contributions which might just have an impact on making our world more manageable and less turbulent. It is an ambitious checklist and yet nothing less will do.

Most of all we need to remember that protecting what we have just now in this fortunate generation will not be cheap or easy or without sacrifice. But it will be necessary.

Because what we have today in this world with all its benefits and progress is not some birth right.

It needs to be worked on, and protected and improved. Only then will there be a proper legacy to leave for future generations. And that must be our overwhelming ambition.



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