

Mary Robinson

“We Cannot Take Freedom For Granted”

5 May Lecture

It is a great honour to be invited to speak to you today on this occasion which has such significance for the people of the Netherlands. This is not an easy task, as I have to try to put myself in your shoes, and link with your collective memory.

Yesterday was a solemn occasion, as it is each year.

2014 has a particular resonance as the anniversary of one of the most tragic milestones in history, the outbreak of the First World War, a conflict so bloody, and engulfing so many nations, that it was known for a time as The Great War.

Only for a time, however, since a second appalling conflict followed soon after.

Another milestone that occurs this year is the seventieth anniversary of the battle for Europe. June 1944 witnessed the Allied landings in France and the beginning of the last titanic struggle to defeat the forces of fascism.

As the people of the Netherlands know only too well, much of the fiercest fighting during that campaign took place on this country's soil. The war would not end for another year, and would see thousands more casualties. But by 1944 the tide of the conflict had finally turned and the peoples of the world could dare to hope that they would live in freedom again.

It is right that we honour the memory of those who made huge sacrifices in the cause of freedom during these terrible conflicts. It is right, too, that we celebrate the precious gift of freedom which the people of the Netherlands enjoy but which so many elsewhere still yearn for.

When I chose the title ‘We cannot take Freedom for Granted’ and prepared the first draft of my speech, I had no inkling of the events which would unfold in Ukraine and Crimea. They put into even sharper focus my core message. It is best captured in the wise words of an eighteenth-century Irishman, John Philpot Curran, often attributed to anti-slavery campaigner Wendell Phillips; ‘*eternal vigilance is the price of liberty*’. Freedom brings with it responsibilities. We cannot take freedom for granted. We need to instil in young people a positive sense of the attributes of being a free citizen, and engage them in a sense of ownership of the process. Instead of scepticism and disengagement, it is vital that each generation brings its own new energy and commitment to reform, to accountability, and to that ‘eternal vigilance’. We saw some elements of that in the ‘occupy’ movements in different countries in the aftermath of the financial crisis, and in the Arab Spring protests. But do our schools and universities, youth clubs and other associations prepare our younger generation to claim their space and exercise that eternal vigilance in a way that safeguards essential freedoms?

Six months ago the world mourned the passing of the most revered individual of our time, Nelson Mandela. Madiba as he was widely and affectionately called, came to symbolise people’s thirst for freedom, not only in South Africa but everywhere. He led his people out of strife and into democratic freedom with the force of his moral authority.

If ever a person had reason to hate, to be filled with bitterness, it was Madiba. Yet he resolutely refused to go down that path. Instead, he reached out the hand of reconciliation, even to his persecutors. He forgave his captors, insisted that his former enemies should share in government, and dedicated himself to building a multiracial society.

What a moral force he became! It is not surprising that Madiba touched people all over the world - even those who never met him.

It is especially significant that young people everywhere are inspired by Madiba’s example.

Europe has enjoyed a long period of freedom from conflict amongst its participants since the end of the Second World War. Indeed, it would be difficult to say when in history the

continent enjoyed such a long absence of war between Western European countries as during the past seventy years. There have been exceptions, the Balkans wars and the conflict in Northern Ireland, also the struggle for democracy in Spain, Portugal and Greece. But most of the population of Europe has nevertheless enjoyed a remarkably long period of peace. Even the emergence of the countries of Eastern Europe from domination passed off almost bloodlessly, which is why the current tension in Ukraine and dispute over Crimea is such a serious moment for Europe.

I belong to a generation that was born close enough to the end of the Second World War to feel its impact personally. For members of that generation, memories of what it was like to live without freedom were still strong, whether from personal experience of the war and its aftermath or from stories handed down by parents and grandparents.

But it is important to reflect that the vast majority of people living in the Netherlands today have experienced nothing but peace and freedom in their lives. Young people may learn from their history books what it was like to be subject to tyranny but they have not experienced it first-hand.

From the shock and revulsion of the post-war era came the desire to prevent such horrors ever staining the world again. The determination to seek a new, better world order, free from conflict, was articulated in the Charter of the United Nations.

The UN also adopted, in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Universal Declaration is not only a visionary document, it is a practical guide for ensuring that freedom endures.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, together with the historic measures which are provided for in the Conventions on Genocide, on Torture, on the elimination of Discrimination against Women, against Racial Discrimination, on protecting the rights of the child, and the rights of people with disabilities, established a comprehensive set of norms for

human behaviour. These norms are legally binding for states which sign and ratify the agreements. In Europe we have the additional institutional strength of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, with decades of case-law of the European Court of Human Rights, and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights which became binding in 2009 when the Lisbon Treaty came into force.

I am not talking about abstract concepts. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was designed to be a code of behaviour which must be followed if we are to avoid re-living the horrors of war. More recently it has become clear that corporations, too, have an obligation to respect all human rights, as set out in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Human rights are not just a goal which we should seek for ourselves. The Universal Declaration makes it incumbent on those who have secured such rights to fight for others to enjoy them also. We are called on in the Preamble to “*keep the Declaration constantly in mind*” and to “*strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance.*”

We can say with certainty that adherence to the articles of the Universal Declaration has played a major part in ensuring that this continent has had such a long period of freedom. You can be proud of the role that diplomats of the Netherlands have played in making sure that democracy ended up conquering fascism, and finding the common ground of coal and steel to construct a basis for a community that grew into the European Union.

But I regret to say that in recent times I sense a rowing back in different regions of the world from the high standards which the Universal Declaration embodies.

I see rising divisions in societies and growing inequality in and between countries.

As we look back at the last half century we see that conflicts, long and bloody, have cost millions of lives, in Africa, in Asia, in the Middle East.

And conflicts continue to rage. In the Great Lakes region where I act as the Special Envoy of the Secretary General, conflicts have raged for decades. The bloodshed and human misery have been immense. It is exactly twenty years since the Rwandan genocide. In the Democratic Republic of Congo alone over five million people are estimated to have died. Yet the fighting in the region has at times almost been forgotten by the rest of the world. Progress is being made under a year old framework for Peace, Security and Cooperation for the Great Lakes Region, which I have characterized as a Framework of Hope. As countries in the region take each difficult step on the path to durable peace, I find myself asking whether those who have grown up in peace truly understand how precious a gift it is?

The Arab Spring has largely failed to deliver on the high hopes of its early days. Bloodshed is common in Egypt and increasingly in Lebanon. Millions have been driven from their homes by the fighting in Syria, and we see despair on the faces of Syria's children. Bombings and killings in Iraq and Afghanistan are a familiar backdrop on our TV screens. In Nigeria, in the Central African Republic hundreds are murdered in the name of religion. Divisions between Sunni and Shiite grow ever sharper.

Refugees from these conflicts appear on our television screens, many having lost relatives, in some cases whole families. These refugees have lost all of their freedoms, carrying with them only a few scant possessions and swelling the tide of emigrants and homeless. Do we treat them with full respect for their dignity and rights? Sadly, the answer is no.

Less graphic but no less significant are the trends which may be seen in richer countries, alarming trends that run counter to the high standards called for by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Political forces building their strength on animosity towards the other, on fear and narrow interests, are on the rise in many places. Greater scepticism is expressed about freedom of

movement, about gay rights. The space where civil society can make its voice heard is being eroded in many countries.

In a number of European countries, and at different levels, people feel uncertainty and apprehension at a time of rapid technological change. Individuals feel threatened in their employment, their income and even their working environment. There can be collective uncertainty about social and cultural identity as social mores change, and faith based groups in particular feel undermined. As countries have begun to trim, or drastically reduce, parts of their social welfare protection the sense of a social contract becomes eroded.

To some the European Union is not seen as providing a sufficient counterbalance to these uncertainties, so that there is a trend of turning away from the European Union model, the very model – with all its faults - that has been central to our seven decades of peace and prosperity.

What can be done to reverse these trends?

I witnessed recently the difference it makes when young people have a real sense of their dignity and worth. During the Summit of the African Union in Addis Ababa in January, I met with a group of adolescent girls and young women from throughout Africa who had been brought there by the YWCA. They were promoting The Girl Declaration, which begins as follows:

I was not put on this Earth to be invisible

I was not born to be denied

I was not given life only to belong to someone else

I belong to me

I have a voice and I will use it

As I listened to their bright confident voices talking about the future they wanted, my heart lifted. At the end of the meeting we danced and laughed together, and I know with certainty

that these young women will make a difference in their communities and their countries, and our world will benefit from their empowerment.

So how do we enhance and encourage the space and involvement of young people? In the first place, I believe that political leaders should do more to give moral as well as political leadership.

Political leadership should begin by eschewing all discrimination against others. Fascism was based on hatred of the other, on the spurious claim that one group is superior and has the right to trample on the rights of those it sees as inferior.

Contrast that with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states at the outset:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”

It continues

“Everyone is entitled to all the freedoms and rights set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

Yet what is the reality we are witnessing today? Once again we hear voices claiming that their social group is superior to others. Some politicians, who ought to know better, play on fears about unemployment and marginalisation by setting groups in society against each other.

Populist slogans of this kind should be shunned. Political leadership which seeks to subvert the principles of human rights by sowing hatred and enmity between peoples should be strongly condemned.

All sectors of society, the business community, faith based groups, local communities should promote a truly engaged sense of citizenship. Human rights will only prosper if citizens engage actively in society. Disillusionment, lack of trust and cynicism are widespread. This

is understandable when we see the income divide between elites who pay themselves inflated salaries and bonuses – often from the public purse – and the underclass who are lucky if they can get the minimum wage. This “winner takes all” approach is an affront to any sense of social solidarity.

But shrugging one’s shoulders and saying “I won’t vote for any of them” is not an option in a democratic society. The right to take part in democratic elections is a sacred right. If we turn our backs and say we don’t care who gets elected, we will be betraying the sacrifice of those who died so that we could be free.

We owe a particular responsibility to the younger generation, who are the present and future of our countries. But what future do we offer them when so many of our young people are educated and trained and then cannot find employment? Small wonder that some young people become cynical and disillusioned. Combatting youth unemployment should be a top priority for every government.

Lastly, I believe we should not dilute or shy away from our obligations towards the poorest people in the world.

Freedom from hunger and want, freedom from disease, freedom from poverty – these, heartbreakingly, are the goals of so many millions. Assisting poor countries and peoples to emerge from poverty is not only of value in itself, it is also beneficial in that it reduces conflict.

Support for developing countries is now also a matter of justice – climate justice. The richer parts of the world, whose development has been based on energy from fossil fuels, have contributed to climate shocks in poor countries such as greater flooding and drought. We have a unique opportunity to redress this harm through ensuring that the impacts of climate change are factored into the post 2015 sustainable development goals, and that we adopt a robust climate agreement in Paris at the end of 2015 which keeps global warming below 2c

degrees above pre-industrial standards. Europe must give strong leadership on this, and I am sure the Netherlands will play its part in generating that leadership.

Good development partners seek, not just to help bring the poorest peoples out of poverty but to strengthen democratic institutions so as to improve governance and accountability.

The Netherlands has been in the forefront of the struggle to bring very poor countries out of poverty. More recently, the ODA performance has faltered somewhat, although this country remains among the most generous.

I believe that, in order to ensure that freedom endures in the years ahead, we must refresh and renew the values which prevailed in the post-war period and which have had such positive results. It is time to revisit the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to recognise how essential its articles are to our freedom and wellbeing. It is a living document which is the birth right of everyone born since 1948.

I return to Nelson Mandela because he set such an example for us to follow. As his fellow countryman, the novelist J. M. Coetzee wrote, *“he was, and by the time of his death, was universally held to be, a great man...as the concept of greatness retires into the historical shadows.”*

On reflection, I am not surprised that young people react so warmly to him. They are more idealistic than their elders. They respond to those they can see are idealistic and are prepared to suffer for it. Their idealism is something to be nurtured.

Let us draw inspiration from Madiba’s words. In his autobiography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, he wrote

“No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”