

**THE RT HON SIR JOHN MAJOR KG CH  
ONE PEOPLE ORATION**

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**THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF DEMOCRACY**

As a boy, in the 1950s, encouraged by close friends, I cut my teeth as a public speaker on a soapbox – across the river in Brixton Market.

In those early days none of my friends would have imagined that – one day – my soapbox would be upgraded to a lectern in this beautiful and historic Abbey.

I doubt that I imparted much wisdom from my Brixton soapbox, but I did learn about people. No-one barracked. No-one told me – as surely they could have done – to go away and come back when I knew something about ... well, *anything*.

Even in a crowded and busy market, some took time to stop and listen or question. No-one seemed to resent me or my views. No-one was hostile, although many must have disagreed with what I said.

Today – as politics has become more rancorous – I have often thought back to that time, and wondered how we lost that tolerance of opposing views.

Certainly, tolerance was missing from the EU Referendum Campaign, when honest and thoughtful political debate was abandoned in favour of exaggeration, half-truths and untruths. No-one seemed ashamed or embarrassed by this.

Indeed, some revelled in it, which suggests that mendacity is acceptable if it panders to a popular prejudice. *Then*, it is sanctioned by many who know it to be untrue, and welcomed by others whose prejudices are supported by it. And, if delivered with wit and panache, it may even be believed.

Some of the media reported what was said – even when they must have known it to be improbable (at best) or untrue (at worst). In this way, the Referendum showcased a deterioration in both the conduct and reporting of our politics.

There will be those who think that my subject, “the Responsibilities of Democracy” is inappropriate for Westminster Abbey – that it is a secular concern, and that the arts and practice of democratic politics are far removed from the higher concerns of the Church.

They are wrong – as wrong, or misguided, as those who argue that the Church should stay out of politics: it should not. Both Church and State care for the wellbeing of people, and if one institution is failing them, the other has a duty to say so. Two-way *constructive* criticism, if conducted civilly, is healthy – and no-one should shrink from it.

In years gone by, the Church was criticised as “The Tory Party at Prayer”. Today, it is often told it is too Left-wing. I doubt the first was ever true; and the charge of Left-wing bias is trotted out whenever the Church talks about poverty.

But the Church *should* talk of poverty. So should we *all*. Poverty is not the sole preserve of the Left. Conservatives from Wilberforce to David Cameron – who made overseas aid to the very poorest a signature policy – have focused upon poverty.

On occasions such as this there are two kinds of Lecture. One is uplifting and intellectual. It enlivens the conscience and leaves us pondering the higher purpose of Man.

My purpose is more prosaic. It is to provoke thought about democracy – both generally and in our own country. Democracy is very precious but – how is it performing in a new world that is changing at bewildering speed? Is it doing its job? Is it at risk? Where is it failing? What is its future?

In many countries, I see a distaste for politics that runs deep. That is a *danger* to democracy. So, inevitably, my theme – in part – is a cry for action where there is none; and of warning where there is peril.

What *is* democracy? It is surely more than electing a government through a universal franchise. Elections are an *expression of* democracy, but the ballot box alone is insufficient.

President Putin wins elections – is Russia a democracy? No – it is not. Is Turkey? Is Egypt? Even on the narrowest and meanest of definitions the answer is – No. Nor are many other countries that hold elections hold elections – sometimes rigged – but, voting apart, have few of the attributes of a genuine democracy.

My worry is that democracy is in retreat; stifled by its own virtues. Democracy operates on consent. That being so, it is slower to make decisions than autocracy or outright dictatorship. Democracy must cajole. Must persuade. Must seek consensus. *Not* so autocracy.

This can make autocracy seem more efficient than democracy, more decisive, more able to deliver its promises, more swift to act in crises. The rise of non-democratic China to economic super-stardom is one of the great stories of history, but there is a price to pay for her success.

The price is a lack of personal freedom for the masses.

For now, countless millions of Chinese are grateful for that economic improvement. But human nature suggests that as their individual wellbeing grows, they will demand greater personal liberty. If that happens, autocracy must yield – or repress. This choice lies ahead for many countries.

At the heart of true democracy is liberty under the law. Democratic government must be freely elected for a fixed period in a universal franchise, untainted by coercion.

There must be checks and balances to its authority. The rule of law must apply. The judiciary must be independent, and there must be a free media, an independent academia, and a functioning Opposition free to oppose without sanctions. Only then can freedom of speech and action be protected.

But these attributes are merely the trappings of democracy.

Democracy in action is more than satisfying the material demands of the majority, or honouring the promises of an election manifesto.

Democratic government must govern for the *future* as well as the *present*. A Governing Party must govern for political *opponents* who did not vote for them – and may never do so.

It must govern for the unborn, and the country they will inherit. For minorities. For the wider international community. And *all* Governments have a responsibility to *themselves* for the manner in which they govern.

One has only to set out these responsibilities to see that no Government, perhaps ever, has met this ideal – Government by men and women, not saints, is an imperfect vehicle for perfection. But that does not mean their imperfections should be ignored or accepted.

Yet, today, they often are, as a disillusioned, disinterested, preoccupied or – in some cases, a cowed or misled – electorate shrug their shoulders and turn away.

In such a climate, democracy faces a threat from the rise of nationalism. This is not theoretical: in many countries that is a reality. In others, a clear and present danger.

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In the democratic West, we have come to believe that our liberal, social and economic model of democracy is unchallengeable. It is not. Last year – as the United Nations has reported – 67 countries suffered a decline in political and civil liberties while only 36 had gains. What has happened there can happen elsewhere.

Over 20 democracies have collapsed during the last two decades, and there is widespread public dissatisfaction in many others.

Across Europe, nationalism has gained more than a foothold. It begins with a populism that masquerades as patriotism, but morphs into something far less attractive.

In many countries, nationalist parties have significant support. They *can* attract true patriots – but are also a political vehicle for those who flavour that patriotism with xenophobia.

Nationalism is authoritarian. It turns easily towards autocracy or – at worst – outright dictatorship. Nationalists hide their threat under an exaggerated love of country, an unthinking patriotism: “my country, right or wrong”. Its leaders view other countries – and sometimes other races – as inferior.

Nationalism is suspicious of foreigners. It accuses immigrants of “stealing jobs” or, in some other way, undermining the indigenous population. This has been so for hundreds of years: it is often wrong, and – let it be said in this House of God – un-Christian.

There is a great difference between nationalism and patriotism. Patriotism is more than pride in country. A mature patriotism concerns itself with the condition of the People, as well as the prestige of the Country. Such a patriotism worries about deprivation, opportunity and incentive.

It asks itself: how can we spread our wealth and opportunity more evenly around our country? And it is as concerned with the growth of food banks as it is with a shortage of aircraft carriers.

I now fear for these broad, socially liberal attitudes.

The financial crisis – less security, low or no growth, and rising taxes – has created public dissatisfaction with the old, albeit fallible, politics. Anger about its shortcomings replaces cool, dispassionate judgement. Despair gives a credibility to promises of easy solutions when – in truth – there are *none*.

Our social and economic liberalism may be fallible but it is not some mish-mash of woolly headed do-gooders. It protects individual liberties and human rights. It promotes market freedoms, ownership of property, and freedom of movement.

We dare not take these familiar values for granted. We need to celebrate them, protect them and practice them: Politics must not become a playground for demagogues.

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Capitalism and free trade are the bulwark of democracy. They have lifted millions of the poorest people in the world out of poverty. As trade has grown, wealth has grown, literacy has risen, and fatal diseases have been eradicated.

But free trade is under attack.

When growth was buoyant, all was well. But, after the financial crash of 2007/8, many workers see global trade as a threat. So do companies exposed to foreign competition.

There *are* problems that must be dealt with. Globalisation *has* distributed its gains unevenly.

Individuals *have* gained wealth that Croesus would have envied.

Global companies *have* driven out competitors, and become mega-rich.

But, to protect itself, capitalism *must* be ethical. If it is not, then opposition to it will grow. Business must confront malpractice and eliminate it.

Capitalism *must* reform itself – or *Government* must make it do so.

“Anything Goes” capitalism is not acceptable: it can only damage free trade and open markets, and encourage protectionism, less trade, slower growth and greater poverty. If that happens, everyone loses. But those with least will lose most.

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Our British democracy is seen as honest, not corrupt; and free, not repressive. Our legal system is widely admired and respected. Our elections are acknowledged as fair, not fixed; and Governments leave and enter Office without violence – and within a few days.

Our Parliament has been a democratic model. As a nation, we can – and should – be proud of all this, and I am ... but ...

I will come to the “buts” in a moment ....

First, let me say, I’m not among that minority of Britons who disparage our country and side with our critics. I am, and always will be, proud to be British.

However, having seen our democracy at work – over many years – from the inside, and for the past sixteen as a reasonably informed outsider, not all is as it could be – or *should* be. *We can* do better.

Our present Parliament faces an extraordinary range of complex problems. Brexit – an historic blunder in my own view, although it is not my theme for this evening – will consume the time of this Parliament, and crowd out domestic issues that are crying out for action.

It would be better were Parliament free to focus its attention on health, social care, housing, education and transport.

But until Brexit has been resolved – which may take years – few, if any, of these subjects will get the attention they deserve.

Nor will constitutional issues over Scotland and Northern Ireland; or the social problems of income disparity and the North/South divide – which surely cannot be permitted to continue as it is. All of these – *each* vital to the future wellbeing of our country – will be secondary to the fallout from last year's Referendum.

Let me now turn to that list of “buts”.

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To cynics, the words “service” and “duty” are old-fashioned, yet they are virtues that deserve praise, not scorn. Our Public Service embodies them.

The Civil Service is a fundamental engine of our democracy. It has an historic memory, which protects against the errors of the past. It is politically independent. It brings balance to our system of government. And yet, in the last 20 years, it has been undermined by its own masters.

When things have gone wrong, a small number of Ministers – against *all* past practice – have blamed the Civil Service for the failure – and not themselves. Political advisers have undermined civil servants and usurped their role. The Freedom of Information Act has hampered the dispassionate advice offered to Ministers.

Ministers may *decide* policy, but the Civil Service must *deliver* it. To do so, it trawls for ideas; delves deep into potential pitfalls; advises; cautions; and prepares legislation.

It is in our national interest that public service should remain a career that attracts some of the very best brains in our country. We should value it, not disparage it.

I hope Government will rethink recent practice on special advisers.

Ministers have a right to non-Civil Service advice. But, as advisers are paid from the public purse, they should be men and women of experience and ability. Many are – but not all. Their role needs redefining. Good special advisers, with expertise and political nous, can make for better government and better liaison with the civil service.

But, over the years, a handful of advisers have acquired unjustified power that has been misused. At times they have driven wedges between Ministers and their civil servants. Some have been used as attack dogs – on both their political opponents and their colleagues. The culprits were often protected by their Ministers, when they should have been dismissed without ceremony.

Some advisers – with intellect but little judgement – are easy prey for the media. They are flattered, wined and dined; and the naïve among them talk unguardedly, whilst the more unscrupulous leak stories that create feuds between senior Ministers, and complicate policy.

Any special advisers that behave in this fashion should go: a “one leak and you’re out” policy would be a worthwhile discipline for the Prime Minister to institute across all Government departments.

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It is a strength of our democracy that debate on policy is fierce. That is as it should be: policy affects people’s lives. Passions can rise – and sometimes it is right for them to do so.

But policy disagreement is not only across the floor of Parliament. Too often, members of the same Party are seen as opponents: not “one of us”, to echo an unfortunate phrase from the 1980s, and this leads to rival camps being formed.

These factions – opposing wings of the same Party – fight one another more vigorously than they do their opponents. This is potentially destructive to the Party system, which is the main operating structure of our democracy. The old political adage: “My opponents are opposite – my enemies are behind”, is currently apt for *both* our main Parties.

There is a reason for this. The anti-European Right wish to control the Conservative Party: the neo-Marxist Left wish to dominate Labour. Both are making headway in a battle for the soul of their respective Parties.

These ideological battles have dangers for our democracy. The rebellious radicals of Right and Left argue for partisan policies that appeal to the extremes of their Party base. As they do so, political divisions widen, consensus shrinks, and a minority of the Party begins to manipulate the majority.

This is dangerous territory. The malcontents should remember that, without some give-or-take, without some effort at consensus, our tolerant Party system can become ungovernable. In politics, as in life, consensus is wise, not weak; and tolerance is a virtue, not a failing.

If fringes begin to dominate a political Party, the middle ground of their support will turn away in disgust, as the shrillest voices and the most extreme views begin to dominate debate.

Where that risk arises, democrats should worry. Indeed, they should do more than worry: they should fight back.

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Politics has always been a tough trade. It arouses strong feelings, and plain speaking which – sometimes – can turn into abuse. The hard-boiled professional would say: “if you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen”.

Well, maybe .... but the language and tone of politics matters. It can enthuse or repel. Excite or deflate. Uplift or cast down. Clarify or confuse. Examine the truth ... or ignore it.

In the 1930s, Oswald Mosley used his oratory to stir up violence. During World War II, Churchill – in Ed Murrow’s memorable phrase – “mobilised the English language and sent it to war”.

In the 1960s, the Conservative Enoch Powell inflamed opinion on immigration – and the Dockers marched in his support.

Oratory can change public opinion – for good or ill.

Today, we need it to explain complex policy in a way that is easily understood.

It is decades since the popular press fully reported speeches in Parliament. The speeches may have been dry, often dull; but, perhaps by osmosis, policy was understood.

Today's media world is more complex. The written press can't be a public service. It is losing readership and fighting for its very existence. In its struggle for survival, it favours sensation – because that's what sells newspapers. This entertains – but may not inform.

Many political stories are spiced up by “*informed* sources”. This is often self-interested malicious comment, and should be read with many a pinch of salt on the side. It may excite and intrigue, but leaves no-one any wiser.

Television news is more informative, but not always so. Often, interviews are brief and confrontational, and focussed on securing a headline for the next news bulletin.

Political news programmes have longer interviews and can be a better source of information but they, too, often slip into confrontation.

In each of the above charades, the electorate is left confused and uninformed.

We cannot only blame the media. “Spin” and “soundbite” replaced informed argument with meaningless phrases: Labour’s “Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime”; and the Conservatives’ “Take Back Control” serve as memorable examples of pitch-perfect absurdity.

They convey *nothing*. They explain *nothing*. And they are worth *nothing*.

And they can mislead. I once used the phrase “back to basics” and it was taken up to pervert a thoroughly worthwhile *social* policy.

A low point was reached when politicians were offered a daily “form of words” to be trotted out in every interview. This is not only undignified, it is self-defeating. As voters hear our elected representatives uttering puerile slogans instead of explaining policy, it is no wonder if respect for them melts away.

Slogans and soundbites are a deceit. Electors deserve the truth in plain English, not in fairy tales. When trust in our elected representatives falls, democracy fails.

There are *rare* occasions when public interest demands “an economy of the truth”; but, in the main, clarity – and honesty – really *is* the best policy.

And by honesty, I mean more than simply straight-talking. I mean honesty in facing up to challenges; honesty in acknowledging fears or dangers; honesty in action; and honesty in admitting the limitations of Government. Honesty can be politically inconvenient, but less so than concealing the truth.

Honesty commands respect. Slogans do not. Soundbites do not. Spin does not. Honesty is *essential* in a functioning democracy. It is infuriating to listen to interviews where every question is side-stepped, or answered with obfuscation. Such conduct treats the electorate with contempt – and no-one should be surprised if they return the compliment.

I don't wish to be prissy about this by suggesting that there was some past, mythical age in which everything was perfect. There certainly wasn't. *I* wasn't. But politicians can do *better* to serve the electorate – and they must do so.

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The essence of our democracy is “One Man, One Vote”. But, except in the ballot box, *no* democracy offers equal influence to every citizen.

Anthony Trollope, honoured here in Poets' Corner, wrote in his biography of Cicero:

“The power of voting was common to all citizens: but the power of influencing the electors had passed into the hands of the rich.”.

That was, of course, two millennia ago in Ancient Rome, but the same “power of influencing” lingers on in modern democracies. The very rich, if they assert themselves, may be able to influence government.

In America, big money perverts the system. The sheer cost of their elections – with most of it spent on advertisements attacking their opponents – is enormous.

A Member of Congress seeking election every two years is perpetually fundraising. Even if donors ask nothing in return for their generosity, it is likely to be in the mind of the politician as he or she considers policy – and it ought *not* to be.

In the UK, money is far less damaging to the system, but still manifests itself through Party funding.

Party funding is an acute dilemma. *All* political parties must raise money to campaign, to run their organisations, to pay their staff – and none can hope to fund all this through membership subscriptions alone.

There are only two ways to fund the balance, and neither is attractive.

At present, the bulk of funding is by wealthy individuals, business, and the Trades Unions. This is bound to give rise to obligations – whether sought or not by the donor – and is intrinsically unhealthy.

In my experience, many donors are altruistic and give money simply to support their Party; but others may seek to exact a price. Whether that price is a policy promise; an appointment; or an honour – it is undesirable.

An alternative is more funding through the public purse. This would be deeply unpopular and I share the general distaste for it.

Nonetheless, it may be the least bad option.

A compromise might be more State funding than at present but, in return, a legal limit to donations from individuals or business or Trades Unions. This should be set at a level where no-one could reasonably argue that it influences policy.

Such a scheme is not perfect. But, on balance, it would be beneficial for our democracy.

Here tonight, in this magnificent and hallowed place, we are surrounded by the spirits of many historical figures who were elected to represent us.

Over many centuries. Many generations. Through times of strife and turmoil. Of uncertainty and change. Through times of national crises. Times of celebration. They are commemorated here, for the service they gave to our nation.

Whatever their political beliefs – they were all elected *by* the people to *serve* the people – and it was the *people* who had the power to dismiss them.

As a boy, I read what Edmund Burke said:

“To deliver an opinion, is the right of all men; that of constituents is a weighty and respectable opinion, which a representative ought always to rejoice to hear; and which he ought always most seriously to consider.

But *authoritative* instructions; *mandates* issued, which the member is bound blindly and implicitly to obey, to vote, and to argue for, though contrary to the clearest conviction of his judgment and conscience, these are things utterly unknown to the laws of this land, and which arise from a fundamental mistake of the whole order and tenor of our constitution.”

I agree with that implicitly.

As that young boy across the river, I would never have believed that the weight of that responsibility would ever fall upon my own shoulders. It was a privilege, but a burden too – as it is for *all* those who bear it.

All must ask themselves:

- Did I do what I *believed* to be right?
- Did I speak up – and not be afraid to speak the truth?

We are blessed to live in this land. But each and every one of us has a *responsibility* to keep democracy alive and kicking and never stifle free speech or freedom of action if it is within the law.

Earlier, I spoke of my soapbox in Brixton, and the tolerance that was shown to me in the salad days of my political life – by many who would have quite reasonably taken an opposite view.

“I do not like what you say” said Voltaire, “but I will defend to the death your right to say it”.

Indeed so. *That* is the responsibility of democracy.