

SIR MARTIN GILBERT MEMORIAL LECTURE

“Rarely has so much talent been so well concealed”

TUESDAY, 14 NOVEMBER 2017

The Rt Hon Sir John Major KG CH

When Esther Gilbert invited me to deliver this inaugural Lecture in Martin’s name, I was honoured to be asked, and delighted to accept.

Many – perhaps most – of you present will have known Martin, enjoyed his friendship, and admired his talent. There was *much* to enjoy, and a great deal to admire.

I first met Martin over 30 years ago, and liked him immediately. He was highly intelligent, inquisitive – and interested in *everything*. He was also self-effacing and modest. Rarely has so much talent been so well concealed.

And his was a *mighty* talent. Together with Boswell’s “Life of Johnson”, Martin wrote one of our greatest biographies. His volumes on the life of Winston Churchill may never be bettered. If Churchill was our greatest Briton – and it is easy to argue that he was – then Martin will be remembered as his peerless chronicler.

Churchill once said that history would treat him kindly because he, himself, would write it! But it will also do so because of Martin’s *monumental* work.

Anyone who knew Martin learned very soon that he was a workaholic: his 88 books testify to that. To him, recording history was an obligation seared deeply into his soul. He accompanied me once on a tour of Israel, and sat in on all my meetings – including those with Prime Minister Rabin and Yasser Arafat.

He recorded – with commentary and colour – every word and action of significance, together with shrewd judgements upon them. If it had been practical to do so, I would have taken Martin everywhere.

But Martin had other work to do. He wrote extensively, and with affection and insight, of Israel – as well as a comprehensive history of the 20th Century – certainly the most crowded and bloodthirsty Century that history has yet known.

But, despite his special interests, Martin was an observer of the *whole* world: he focused on the key events; and – in his writing – not only brought the past to life, but often foresaw what its effects would be.

The chronicler and historian was also a seer – and his intuitive and enquiring mind over how history unfolded provides my theme for this evening.

Those famous lines by Rudyard Kipling come to mind:

“I keep six honest serving men
 (They taught me all I knew);
 Their names are What and Why and When
 And How and Where and Who.”

Those were the questions to which Martin always sought answers.

Martin saw the world as it *was*. At this moment, we need to see it as it *is*.

Some of what is happening today is uplifting: but much is not.

Forty years ago, four in every ten people in our world lived in dire poverty: today, notwithstanding a near doubling of world population, that has fallen to less than *one* in every *ten*.

Today, and every day, that number falls by a further quarter of a million.

In the last 25 years, child mortality has halved – and better medicine and diet has saved the lives of 100 million children.

I could go on. In the midst of the noisy mayhem, it is easy to overlook quiet, meaningful progress.

We can be proud, too, of the advances in science, in technology, in medicine and in longevity. So much that was once a mystery is now known. So much that once seemed *impossible* is now a daily occurrence.

But, while science and humanity have advanced, politics and statesmanship have not. In some ways, we seem have gone backwards.

The United Nations reports that – only last year – 67 democracies saw a decline in political and civil liberties, and only 36 countries registered gains. Hate crimes have increased. Terror continues unabated.

In many countries – *in* and *beyond* Europe – nationalism and populism has bred intolerance – and has grown. Often, this is the seedbed of autocracy and the signpost to outright dictatorship. History has surely taught us *not* to ignore this: I know that Martin would never have done so.

As one looks around the world, there are wars – or civil wars – in Syria, in Iraq, in Libya, in Somalia, in Yemen, in Darfur and, of course, in Afghanistan.

There are new, and dangerous tensions, in Korea and the South China Sea.

The Middle East remains part war zone, part uneasy peace, part tinder-box waiting to be lit.

Syria is a failed state. Sunni–Shia rivalry – epitomised in Saudi–Iranian tensions – destabilises the region. The former unity of the Gulf States has gone. Neither Turkey nor Egypt is in a state of grace.

And, in the twenty years since the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, an agreed solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict seems further away than ever.

People sometimes speak of the Middle East as though it were a single problem requiring a single solution. It isn't: it is *many* intractable problems – often poisoned by the past, and with emotions too deep and too wide to be readily stilled.

There are also armed conflicts – too many to list – that in recent years have been seen on every Continent.

And there are new threats, unlike any we have known before. Many States – and, most probably, terror groups as well – are developing offensive cyber capabilities that could be targeted anywhere. It is conceivable we might not even know we were under attack – or from where that attack had come.

But we know how it could be deployed. It could hit anything from missile defences to nuclear power plants; to water supplies; to innovative research; to business interests; or to Government secrets. *Every* interest, including *national* interest, is potentially vulnerable – in this and every other country.

We are living through an uneasy time, with an extraordinary diversity of risks. Common sense would suggest that the most powerful nations of the world would be getting together around a table to address these common problems.

But they are not – because political squabbles are standing in the way of statesmanship. So, in these turbulent times, we are adrift with no anchor of purpose.

Solutions require diplomacy and statesmanship, yet – at the moment – both seem in short supply.

This is worryingly true of the relationship between America and Russia and the EU.

At the moment, America and Russia look at each other with a level of mistrust not seen since the dog days of the Soviet Union.

This is not simply the result of grand-standing by Presidents Trump and Putin – although that is a factor. But the root of antagonism lies in intractable political attitudes that are not easily resolved.

Russia claims American policy is hostile to her interests.

America believes Russian policy towards her neighbours is aggressive.

Russia believes America is waging economic war on her, and encouraging regime change. She accuses the West of interfering in her traditional sphere of influence. She is suspicious – and resentful – of NATO expansion into former member nations of the Warsaw Pact.

America's concerns are a mirror image. She argues that former Soviet Union countries, now satellites to Russia, have an absolute right to self-determination and sovereignty, and shouldn't be menaced by Russian ambitions.

She accuses Russia of invading Ukraine; supporting a despot in Syria; and interfering in the recent American Presidential election.

There are further disagreements about Iran, Libya and Afghanistan – as well as upon issues of trade and climate change. A failure of diplomacy enables these grievances to curdle – and they are doing so.

On both sides the charges are deeply felt, and supported by popular opinion in their respective countries: even with goodwill, it would be challenging to resolve them – but at present there is *no* goodwill.

And this is relevant because we live in an age in which popular prejudices affect policy more than at any time in modern history.

Mr Putin – who was elected to make Russia strong again – delights in tweaking Uncle Sam’s nose, because to do so is wildly popular with the Russian people.

To add to the mix, the EU has its own very similar store of grievances with Russia. It is also out of step with America over policy to contain Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

Nor does Europe agree with other policies of an erratic American President they neither understand nor much admire. They worry about his commitment to NATO, to free trade, and to America’s European allies.

In the midst of all this, British electors have voted to leave the EU – albeit without the opportunity to explore an opinion on *how* we should leave – or *what* future relations we should maintain. That was denied them with a ballot offering a simple “Yes” or “No” answer to an issue of *immense* complexity and detail.

I don’t wish to enter the labyrinth of trade and commerce options with Europe this evening. These are important to our economic and social wellbeing, but the implications of leaving go far wider. Our departure has political consequences that may be as profound as any economic effects.

Martin, I think, would have focused on these.

One – for obvious reasons crucial to me – is the question of a customs border between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

In the Referendum, Tony Blair and I travelled together to Northern Ireland to warn of the risks to such a border – only to have our concerns dismissed. It seemed it was – and remains – the problem no-one wished to confront, and everyone wished to vanish away. But how can it?

The Peace Process has transformed life – not only in Northern Ireland – but in the South. Relations between Belfast and Dublin have improved beyond measure – and those between London and Dublin are now better than at any time in our history.

For the last two decades, the lack of any physical border has made a vital contribution to community harmony, as well as trade between North and South. Now, albeit in a different guise, a border is likely to return.

There is general goodwill to resolve this issue, but no-one has yet found an acceptable way of doing so.

The obvious options fall foul of partisan politics.

We could stay in the Single Market and Customs Union. The British Government opposes that.

We could conduct customs controls within the Republic. The Unionist Parties oppose that.

We could grant Northern Ireland a unique status in which they, and they alone of the United Kingdom, remain in the Single Market. That is constitutionally hard to accept for the British Government and anathema to the Unionists.

Such an outcome also has dangers. It would be likely to increase calls for a Border Poll, in which a divided public in Northern Ireland – who voted to *remain* in the EU – are asked if they still wish to do so by leaving the *UK* and becoming part of the Republic. This could well lead to violence.

All these ramifications were not only foreseeable – they were *foreseen*. Now, those who brushed them aside as of no consequence – or denied them altogether – must find a solution.

For a long time, British foreign policy has been based upon the twin pillars of our relations with America and the European Union. To have been straddled between these two economic and political giants has served our interests well.

But, once we abandon the European Union, we become far more dependent upon only one of those pillars and – for four and possibly eight years – upon a President far less predictable, and less attuned to our free market and socially liberal instincts than his predecessors.

Despite the romantic view of committed Atlanticists in the UK, the “special relationship” they cherish is not a union of *equals*. I wish it were – but it isn’t: America dwarfs the UK in economic and military power. Within the EU we can assert ourselves and lead. But raw power matters. With America, we follow.

And – once the UK leaves the EU – our relationship with the United States will change. America needs a close ally *inside* the EU: once *outside*, that can no longer be *us*.

At the same time, the EU is focused on a long list of internal problems: Catalonia; Greek debt; immigration; nationalist populism; the future shape of the Union; the intransigency of the Visegrad countries; and, of course – Brexit.

It is a full agenda, and leaves too little time and energy for external problems.

It is a dispiriting reality for those of us in the Western democracies that – as autocratic China confidently sets out extraordinary long-term ambitions – the democratic nations of the West appear to be navel-gazing at disputes they do not know how to resolve.

A decade or so ago, it was easy to argue that the democratic system of the West was irresistibly destined to spread ever more widely. It may yet do so, but there is much less confidence now that it will be admired and copied in countries where, until now, democracy and liberal values have been unknown.

Almost wherever one looks, democracy – with its gentle instincts of persuasion and consensus – appears to be in trouble, and often in retreat, while populist nationalism and autocracy is growing.

The characteristics of populist nationalism are becoming easy to recognise. Leaders are said to be charismatic – although in my own view that is a much abused description. Populists deliver *personal* rule, not *democratic* rule through the institutions of government.

They disparage institutions. They promise what cannot be achieved. They dislike bureaucracy, and experts, and independent courts. The media is either their flag-waver or their enemy.

Their creed is to imply that they *alone* understand their nation’s problems, and that they *alone* can solve them. They are *not* democrats, and when they claim to represent the view of “the people”, they are only ever representing the people who agree with *them*.

To recognise this is the first protection against it. We must never be complacent about democracy. It is *not* a given. For all its shortcomings, it must be cherished and protected.

When an established democratic system begins to fray – perhaps even fracture – it is time for democratic politicians of *all* parties to come to its rescue.

In America, discontent elected President Trump. In France, the old political establishment was shattered on the left *and* right and President Macron emerged. Less democratic outcomes have been evident in Austria, in the Czech Republic, in Poland and in Hungary.

In Germany, the far right AfD returned 93 members to the Bundestag. And, in the UK – an anti-establishment, anti-immigration, anti-European Party emerged, flourished for a while, and opened the way for the British to vote to leave the EU.

None of this means our democratic system is in danger of collapse, but we do need to restore public affection for it.

For when the public begins to turn away, believing that “all politicians are the same”; that “no-one understands” their everyday problems; that it doesn’t matter who you vote for because “nothing ever changes”, the warning signs are flashing.

To retrieve its reputation, democratic politics must re-ignite growth and optimism and hope.

In our own country, it must tackle the obstacles that prevent people from achieving perfectly natural ambitions: to be decently housed, preferably in a home of their own. To have a secure job. To see their children educated well in the state sector. To be able to look forward to reasonable security in retirement.

In our country, these are modest ambitions, but for many of our young people they are pipe-dreams.

University students leave full-time education with debts they must repay; they cannot afford homes, even while interest rates are rock bottom; and the collapse of company pension schemes means they must contribute more to their own retirement than *any* previous generation.

Collectively, these burdens are a daunting way to start working life.

The popularity of *any* leader, or *any* system of Government, is inextricably linked to raising the living standards of the nation.

For many decades in the UK living standards rose about 20%, but in the last ten years that figure has fallen to under 2% – with many people literally worse off than they were at the time of the financial crash of 2007.

This is not just in the UK. It is true, also, of the US and many countries across Europe: it is hardly surprising if there is disillusion: the only surprise is that rebellions against the status quo have been so peaceful.

I have always believed that, as far as practicable, people should stand on their own two feet. I am committed to the free market and benevolent capitalism.

But that does not mean “anything goes” capitalism. Nor does it mean the State can ignore its obligations to smooth its citizens’ way to a better quality of life. The State cannot – must not – stand aside where the wellbeing of their people is at stake.

By this I don’t simply mean the State must offer hand-outs, or subsidies or social benefits: although, for some that *will* always be necessary.

What I do mean is that *any* Government should worry less about Party ideology; less about placating self-interested lobby groups; less about believing *their* way is the *only* way – and worry far *more* about delivering pragmatic policies that enable people to improve their own lifestyle.

I consider myself very fortunate to have been born – and to have lived – in this country. I would not – could not – live *contentedly* anywhere else. I am as proud of my country as *any* Briton.

But, as we work to secure our nation's future, we must be realistic about how we are now seen by our friends around the world – and where we *stand* in the world.

We are still a sizeable power but – in a world of 7 billion – we 65 million Britons shouldn't over-inflate our influence.

We are less than 1% of the world's population.

China and India are each around 20%.

That already matters – but will matter even more as they continue to grow economically.

On some measures, we are still the fifth (or, possibly, sixth) largest economy in the world: and we can be proud of that. But on other measures we are ninth – or lower – with much larger nations snapping at our heels.

The world sees that and so must *we*. And, however you look at it, weakening our ties with Europe and the US can only *diminish* our influence. To maximise our role, we must use our skills to work with *others* around the world, and *not* isolate *ourselves* within it.

On occasions such as this, it is natural to focus on the challenges we face. But a more rounded picture also embraces the many achievements we should celebrate.

Such as the innate humanity – or goodness, if you wish – of so many individual people. One of the glories of our country is the number of those who are involved in voluntary work, in charities, in philanthropy – both great and small, both national and within local communities.

I look around this room and see friends whose background and activities I know well. I know what they have done in offering their time and their energy and their treasure to others, often unsung but not unnoticed – and I know its effect.

We can multiply that in every part of our country and – despite the difficulties and concerns I have spoken of – there is a warmth in that, a national empathy, a basic soundness of purpose that makes me positive about our future.

When I last saw Martin he was very ill, in hospital unable to speak or move. Esther was with him, and caring for him, with a devotion that I cannot praise too highly. She cared for him, hoped for him, prayed for him, and cried for him. In all that – even in his final illness – Martin was a lucky man.

During that last visit I talked to Martin – of current events, of the world, of what we had done together. Although he was unable to respond, I am sure that he heard my words, and took in all that was said.

Even then, in the closing days of his life, his love of yesterday was still married to his curiosity about tomorrow.

And when we lost him there was one small consolation: ahead of us all, as always, Martin finally learned about the greatest mystery of all.

We miss him – but we'll never forget him.

His books speak to us still – and will continue to do so for generations to come.

Martin not only left us his history, but also the legacy of this wonderful Learning Centre.

In the hands of Esther, Harry Solomon, Victor Blank and other distinguished Trustees, this promises to be an intellectual landmark in the lives of many people.

Martin always believed that – by having a knowledge of the past – the future could be shaped for the better.

He would have been proud of this Centre.

And he would have been *right* to be proud.

Just as *we* are right to be proud of – and thankful for – the life and the legacy of our friend, Martin Gilbert.

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