

Hilary Benn Speech to Launch ippr's Independent Commission on National Security

May 23, 2007. PWC.

Thanks Nick, thanks Ian, thanks George.

It's a pleasure to be here at PWC to help launch this commission, with so many people so distinguished in the field.

This work is urgently needed and it is certainly an ambitious project. Your terms of reference span the entire world and almost every sphere of policy – from climate change to intelligence gathering, and from immigration to how we win hearts and minds.

And so it should, because our relationship as human beings – one with another – is defined at this moment in history by our interdependence in a world that is changing fast.

And as we become ever more interdependent, so the question of how we will learn to live safely and securely together on this small and fragile planet will become ever more important.

The truth we face is that many of the biggest challenges in our world today are about security and power: climate change, energy supply, the movement of people, global diseases such as SARS, and international terrorism.

I am delighted that ippr is taking on this work. You have consistently led progressive thinking on the big issues of our age, not least in international development, and I'm sure that the recommendations of this commission will be hugely influential.

And that owes a great deal to your leadership Nick, and to the hard work of all those who have worked for ippr in the past and those who do so today.

And for those of you who don't know, Nick and I go back a long way. In fact, he replaced me in my last job as Special Adviser to David Blunkett before I became an MP. Let it be a warning - just look where former special advisers can end up!

The broad approach which this commission is taking is clearly the right one. Questions of national and international security cannot be thought about in isolation or in different Whitehall silos. They are questions that cut to the heart of our national life, our society, and the role we choose to play in the world.

Yes, it's about a world class military and intelligence work. Yes, it's about how we balance our precious individual freedoms with giving the police and our security services the means they need to do their job of protecting us.

But as you rightly identify, it's also about broader and deeper issues too; in particular the values our society lives by, the way we talk about these in the world and the way we defend them.

If the 20th century was defined by the ideological conflict that began with the Russian Revolution and ended with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, then I think this century will be shaped by the choice between a world that looks outwards, which embraces multilateralism and which seeks to shape globalisation in the interests of social justice or a world in which isolationism, protectionism and narrow nationalism hold sway.

And in the decade ahead, in a world in which the limits to what can be achieved by conventional military force are becoming ever clearer, I think that our security will now depend just as much on our ability to use soft power. Our ability to attract and persuade others to our view, as well as to listen, really listen, and try and understand other cultures.

Hard power can certainly win battles. But without soft power, we cannot win the peace that will deliver better governance and lasting prosperity and security. Hard power won the Second World War - and it needed to – but it was the Marshall Plan and the creation of the European Union that gave us 60 years of peace and development in Europe.

So I hope that one of the issues you will confront in this commission is a common misconception about values. Over the last few decades we have seen a remarkable shift in values across the world. As we have opened up to each other, and the media has become global, a new consensus is forming. Many values which in the past have been wrongly claimed as distinctly western are now obviously common to all of us.

Democracy. Freedom. Tolerance. The right to an education. The right to have a say in how we are governed.

These are not western values. They can be found across the globe: in India, the world's largest democracy; in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation; across most of Africa, the world's poorest continent; in the US, the world's richest country; and across Europe, the world's largest economic union.

A worldwide Gallup poll in 2005 sought the views of 50,000 people in 55 countries. Eight out of ten citizens said that despite its problems, democracy was the best system of government. In Africa it was nine out of ten.

And I have seen first hand how strongly people feel about democracy and their right to choose the way they will live.

I have talked with rural villagers in Afghanistan, which has held its first ever election, and with people in the DRC where, despite the legacy of violence, people turned out to register and to vote in numbers that would shame some western democracies.

These shared values are now the foundation of our shared security. Because when people work together for the same thing, they are least likely to harm each other.

So how we choose to live together in the world is a decision for all of us - countries, communities, and individuals – and the choice we make will have implications for the security of all of us.

Nowhere is all this being tested more than by international terrorism. I have seen this first hand, both as the Secretary of State for International Development and as a constituency MP.

Three of the suicide bombers who killed 52 innocent people and injured 700 others on their way to work in London on the seventh of July 2005 came from my constituency in central Leeds. Two lived there and one worked as a learning support assistant at a local primary school.

I asked myself – the community asked itself - how could British people do this to their neighbours? What was it about these young men that led them to nurture such hatred in their midst? And how can we prevent others doing the same in future?

Many British Muslims – and non-Muslims – are angry about Iraq, angry about the failure to make peace in the Middle East, angry about what they see as other historical injustices in the wider world. And because we live in a democracy, and thanks heavens we do, we are free to say what we think; so am I, so are you.

I feel angry about things too. Poverty. That 5,000 children died today for lack of clean water. But what we can surely all agree on is that we have to act to deal with injustice.

That is why peace in the Middle East has to be a priority for international action. A peaceful state of Palestine living alongside a peaceful and secure Israel would not just help that region. It would transform the politics of our whole world.

That is why we have to fight global poverty to enable people to build a better life in the land of their birth.

That is why we have to deal with climate change. What will we do when human beings start fighting – not about ideas or national identity - but about water ?

That is why we need a United Nations capable of fulfilling the task we entrusted to it as it was created out of the ashes of the Second World War. A

UN able to protect people from genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

And that is why one of the most important tasks for the new leadership of the Labour Party – and of our country – will be to continue to reach out to the rest of the world, to help build that stronger UN, and to show our commitment to multilateralism as a way of dealing with the problems of the world.

And in doing so, we have to be clear that this is not a clash between the West and Islam, although the terrorists claim that it is.

In the past 10 years, terrorism has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of people, in Asia, in Africa, and in the Middle East as well as in Europe and the USA; many of them were poor, and many of them were Muslims. And the futures of many others were blighted by these acts. After 9/11, the global economic shock kept 10 million people trapped in extreme poverty.

Nor is this a global war, although the terrorists would like to portray it as such. It is about identity. It is about values.

That's why I recently made a speech in New York about the phrase "the war on terror".

Language matters.

And isn't it clear to all of us that we can't win by military means alone, and that, in fact, this is the vast majority of the people in the world - of all nationalities and all faiths - against a small number of loose, shifting and disparate groups.

Groups who have relatively little in common apart from their identification with others who share their distorted view of the world and their idea of being part of something bigger.

Groups who want to force their individual and distorted views on others, without asking, without debate, through violence.

By letting them feel part of something bigger, we give them strength. But we, by contrast, are part of something bigger. And anyone who thinks that we will give up our values of tolerance and freedom without a struggle is very much mistaken.

These are all big issues for this commission.

So I look forward to your findings and hope that you will help show us the way forward - recognising that our national interest is now inextricably tied to the global interest and to the development of nations - and set out how we together can fashion the international arrangements that will enable us to

manage our differences and create the peace and security that is the dream of every single one of us.

The next few months offer a real chance to shape this most important debate about the future of our country and of our world.

To be a human being in this age is to be interdependent.

To fulfil our potential in this age is to overcome the poverty that imprisons it.

To be safe in this age is to act together to build a more peaceful and prosperous world.

There really is no other choice.

Thank you.

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