Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Humanising hell: our restless conscience and the search for peace - 2014 One People Oration

2014-10-23

Thank you Dean and good evening ladies and gentlemen. It is an immense honour to be here. I have made hundreds of speeches in the House of Commons as a Member of Parliament for 25 years, but this is the only one I have ever given in Westminster Abbey. In its early days, in the early 1300s, Parliament actually sat here, in the Chapter House and then in the Refectory of the Abbey. So as an MP I feel very at home, but there are important differences.

The Commons is a scene of noisy disagreement, while here we are surrounded by a thousand years of reflection and calm. There I would be cut-off mid-flow if I went a minute over my allotted time; here I can speak for as long as I like and have some hope the audience might actually be listening. When I speak in the House of Commons I'm just yards from where my hero William Pitt The Younger debated with Fox and Burke and Sheridan, but here he is actually buried, with his father, in what I believe is the only grave in our country to contain 2 Prime Ministers.

People often comment that politicians are becoming younger, but Pitt was Prime Minister at the age of 24, having twice turned down the job at 23. There has never been a younger occupant of Number 10 before or since, and I doubt there will ever be one again, or one as peculiarly gifted as a Parliamentary orator. Pitt was Prime Minister for 18 years and 11 months, and for half that time Britain was at war with France and frequently at risk of invasion. The inscription on his grave has been worn smooth by passing feet over 2 centuries. I did once offer to restore it and I repeat that offer tonight, although I think the Abbey authorities have yet to recover from a Yorkshireman volunteering to spend his own money.

Another hero of mine, William Wilberforce, is also buried here, thanks to his family and friends countermanding his wish to be buried elsewhere. His house, number 4 Palace Yard, stood just over that wall, and was by every account a veritable pandemonium of books, pets, visitors and hapless servants he never had the heart to let go. From amid that ferment of ideas and activity he spent 20 years converting the people and entire political establishment of Britain to the cause of abolition. For year after year he moved motions in the House of Commons that were defeated. I do not intend to emulate tonight his 3-and-a-half-hour speech

in the Commons in 1789. But in 1807, 2 decades after he began, he finally succeeded in turning our country from a slave-trading nation into one that bullied, harassed and bribed other countries into giving up their own detestable traffic in humans. And he did this without ever holding any office in any government.

Although I am not an intensely religious person, in writing my book on Wilberforce I came to admire the unquenchable determination to succeed in a cause that religion – in his case evangelical Christianity – inspired in him. Because he believed he was accounting to God for how he spent his time, he actually recorded what he did with it, in detail, every day. His papers include tables accounting for each quarter hour of the day. One typical entry describes 7 and a half hours of House of Commons business, 8 and a quarter hours in bed, 5 and a half hours of “requisite company &c visits &c”, 3-quarters of an hour of serious reading and meditation, 15 minutes unaccounted for or dressing, and 1 hour described as “squandered”. I can only imagine how much time would be allocated to that column if such a table had to be draw up by every Member of Parliament today.

While few in his age had his gift with words and his obsessive drive, Wilberforce was not alone in being inspired by his faith. He was part of the Clapham sect, a small group of politicians, lawyers, merchants, churchmen, bankers, and politicians based at Clapham Common, who were responsible for one of the greatest varieties and volumes of charitable activity ever launched by any group of people in any age.

Their primary goals were the abolition of the slave trade and the founding of Sierra Leone, but on top of this they set up a staggering array of charitable causes: the London Missionary Society, the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, the Church Missionary Society, the Religious Tract Society, the Society for Promoting the Religious Instruction of Youth, the Society for the Relief of the Industrious Poor, the British National Endeavour for the Orphans of Soldiers and Sailors, the Institution for the Protection of Young Girls, the Society for the Suppression of Vice, the Sunday School Union, the Society for Superceding the Necessity for Climbing Boys in Cleansing Chimneys, the British and Foreign Bible Society, and 2 with particularly wonderful names: The Asylum House of Refuge for the Reception of Orphaned Girls the Settlements of whose Parents Cannot be Found, and finally, my favourite, the Friendly Female Society, for the Relief of Poor, Infirm, Aged Widows, and Single Women of Good Character, Who Have Seen Better Days.

And we think we live in an age of activism!

I know that for many people today religious faith of all kinds remains a great inspiration and channel for charity and altruism. And whatever faith or creed we live by, inherent in our democracy is the idea that our freedoms and rights are universal. Oppression or conflict or poverty or injustice anywhere in the world has stirred our consciences, as individuals and collectively, throughout our history.

I am going to argue this evening that maintaining and building on that national tradition is absolutely vital in this century, as a moral obligation and in order to prevent wars at a time of growing international instability.

As we mark

100 years since the First World War

, in which so many of our countrymen perished because conflict was not averted, we should be inspired to maintain our restless conscience as a nation, and be determined to do whatever we can to improve the condition of humanity. We should have faith – in the broadest sense – in our ideas and our ideals as a country, and in our ability to have a positive impact on the development of other nations and the future of our world.

One of the most moving sights many of us have seen in some time is the sea of poppies encircling the Tower of London, commemorating each and every British and Commonwealth military fatality in the First World War. It is a silent exhortation to remember, to be grateful for what we have, and to learn the lessons of those times when peace had to be restored at so great a price to humanity. So too is the revered grave of the Unknown Warrior here in this Abbey, “buried among the Kings”, as his tomb says, as one of the many who “gave the most that man can give, life itself, for God, for King and Country, for Loved Ones and Empire, for the Sacred Cause of Justice and the Freedom of the World”. Only yesterday the remains of 15 British soldiers from the war were reburied in Belgium, 100 years after they were killed in battle, reminding us that we are still counting the cost of that terrible conflagration.

As Foreign Secretary, for 4 years I occupied the office used by Sir Edward Grey, with its windows overlooking Horseguards and St James’ Park. Standing at those windows, as he contemplated the catastrophe about to engulf the world, he famously said “the lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime”.

The failure of diplomacy on the eve of the war ushered in greater suffering than Grey and his contemporaries could ever have imagined: war on an industrial scale, “the butchery of the unknown by the unseen”, in the words of one war correspondent, in which 10 million soldiers died on all sides, 20 million were severely wounded and 8 million were permanently disabled; in which appalling massacres, rapes and other atrocities were committed against thousands of civilians, and in which millions of refugees were created; and which was all to be followed by the Second World War, the massacres in Poland, the gas chambers and concentration camps of the Holocaust, pogroms in the Soviet Union, and the slaughter of war and revolution and famine in China.

It is tempting to look back on the horrors and evils of the past, and to think that these things could not happen again. It would be comforting to imagine that we have reached such a level of education and enlightenment that ideologies like Nazism, Fascism and Communism that

led to mass slaughter, and the nationalism that leads states to attack their neighbours, or groups within states to massacre their fellow-citizens, have all seen an end. But sadly, this is an illusion.

There is an additional illusion that sometimes takes hold, as it did before the First World War, that a permanent peace has arrived. Then, Europe had enjoyed 99 years without widespread war. The Great Powers had found a way back from the brink of conflict several times, and Grey and his colleagues can be forgiven for thinking that crises could always be resolved by diplomacy, when in fact they were on the edge of the 2 greatest cataclysms of history.

History shows that while circumstances change, human nature is immutable. However educated, advanced, or technologically skilled we become, we are still highly prone to errors of judgement, to greed, and thus to conflict.

There is no irreversible progress towards democracy, human rights and greater freedoms, just as there is unlikely to be any such thing as a state of permanent peace. Unless each generation acts to preserve the gains it inherits and to build upon them for the future, then peace, democracy and freedom can easily be eroded, and conflict can readily break out.

It is true that there is more education, welfare, charitable endeavour and kindness in our world than ever before, that we have reached extraordinary diplomatic milestones like the

Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

, and that we have a

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system carrying out responsibilities from peacekeeping to the protection of our environment.

We should never lose faith in the positive side of human nature, and always retain our optimism and belief in our ability to shape our destiny.

But my argument is that it is also true that the capacity of human beings to inflict unspeakable violence upon others, of ideologies that are pure evil to rise up, or for states that are badly-led to wade into new forms of conflict, are all as present as ever.

We often read about massacres as if such barbaric things are only to be found in the pages of history. But the short span of our own lifetimes tells a different story, from Europe to the Middle East, to Africa and Asia.

Only 19 years ago, in Europe, 8 thousand men and boys were massacred in Srebrenica in a single week. Over 5 million people have been killed in the Congo in the last 2 decades. In April this year, when I attended the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, I and the

other international representatives were standing above the place where nearly a third of a million bodies are buried in a single grave, part of a million women, men and children slain in cold blood within 100 days. Only last week a new trial began of 2 of Pol Pot's henchmen, part of the Khmer Rouge regime that killed more than a million people. In Iraq and Syria, in a perversion of religion,

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is terrorising communities with beheadings and crucifixions. And think of the barrel bombs raining down on schools in Syria from the Assad regime today, and the pitiless desperation to hold onto power needed to produce such utter inhumanity.

Aggressive ideology, despotism and fanaticism live on, despite all our other advances and achievements. This is the human condition. Our optimism and faith in human nature will always have to contend with this harsh truth, at the same time as being essential to overcoming such evils.

That is why it is so important for us to have a strong sense of history, so that we never lose sight of how fragile peace and security can be. And so we understand that diplomacy and the peaceful resolution of conflicts is not an abstract concept, but our greatest responsibility.

In our information-rich, media-saturated world history can be caricatured as a luxury, not for those who have their hands full running the country. But I could not imagine having been Foreign Secretary without drawing on the advice of the Foreign Office historians, who were able to offer historical precedents for every conceivable revolution, insurgency, treaty or crisis, and who produced maps and papers that shed light on the most intractable of modern problems.

It is as important to consult the lessons of history in foreign policy as it is to seek the advice of our embassies, our intelligence agencies, our military and our allies. History is not set in stone, and is open to endless reinterpretation. But the habit of deep and searching thought rooted in history must be cultivated: not to paralyse us, or make us excessively pessimistic, but to help us make sound decisions and guide our actions.

It remains as true today as it was when Edmund Burke first expressed it, that the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men and women to do nothing. We cannot in our generation coast along, or think it is not our responsibility, or that it is too difficult, to tackle conflict and injustice that bring misery to millions. However pressing the crises of the day, we have to address the fundamental conditions that lead to armed conflict and reduce the human suffering it causes.

This means not only maintaining Britain's global role – living up to our responsibilities, protecting our interests internationally and being able to project military power where

necessary – but also consciously encouraging and developing the ideas, the concepts and strategies needed to address poverty, conflict and injustice.

All our advances start with an idea. Powerful ideas can then become unstoppable movements, as indeed the abolition of the slave trade did in the 18th century. For that to happen governments have to adopt the best of these ideas, and leaders have to be prepared to be open to them and radical about them.

I took as the title of my lecture a remark by Admiral John Fisher, First Sea Lord and commander of the Royal Navy at the start of the First World War.

In 1899, he was sent as Britain's representative to the first Hague Peace Conference, called by Russia, to discuss the growing arms race and place curbs on the use of certain weapons in war. As these proposals were discussed at the negotiating table, he is said to have remarked with some passion that one could sooner talk of "humanising hell" than of "humanising war".

While he was of course right about the hell of war, in actual fact the traumatic experience of conflict and great idealism have often gone together. It has often been the very experience of war which has spurred mankind's greatest advances in international relations, based on ideas which were radical when first presented.

When Henry Dunant observed the agonising deaths of thousands of injured men at the battle of Solferino in 1859, his outrage and activism led to the 1864 Geneva Convention – 150 years old this year – the founding text of contemporary international humanitarian law, which laid the foundation for the proper treatment of the wounded, medical personnel and prisoners of war.

After World War One, there was a vast and intensive period of institution-building, leading to the League of Nations, the International Labour Organisation, the prohibition on use of chemical weapons and the creation of the High Commissioner for Refugees to find a way of returning millions of European refugees to their homes, and which supports over 50 million refugees and displaced people worldwide today.

While World War Two was raging, Roosevelt and Churchill spent hours discussing the creation of a new international body to prevent conflict in the future, which led to the United Nations itself, the Security Council and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In our lifetimes the outrage at atrocities in Cambodia, Rwanda, Liberia and Bosnia led to the creation of the International Criminal Court and the concept of the Responsibility to Protect. In the last 20 years our country has played a leading role in securing international bans on the use of cluster munitions and landmines, and I was proud to sign on Britain's behalf the

ratification of the International Arms Trade Treaty, the culmination of 10 years of advocacy begun here in Britain.

The humanising of the hell of war is thus a continual process. While our goal must always be to avert conflict in the first place, of course, except as a last resort as provided in the

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charter, it is also essential to establish norms of behaviour about what is unacceptable even in times of war.

This is vital so that if conflict breaks out despite our best efforts, governments feel restrained by the threat of accountability for any crimes that are committed, we have mechanisms to protect civilians, and peace agreements take account of the need for reconciliation and the punishment of crimes against humanity.

The crucial point is that while the international bodies we have are the result of diplomacy, they do not simply arise on their own. They are the product of ideas generated by individuals, groups or governments refusing to accept the status quo, so that then with enough momentum, public support and political commitment became reality.

I think of this ‘restless conscience’, as I call it, as an enduring and admirable British characteristic. Our

NGOs

, lawyers, academics and crown servants have an extraordinary impact internationally.

In my time in the Foreign Office I found our diplomats a powerful part of this tradition, from their work on the abolition of the death penalty to improving the lot of

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communities worldwide to helping negotiations as far away as the now-successful Mindanao Peace Process in the Philippines.

This is part of our country’s distinctive contribution to the world, and it involves the power of our ideas as much as the skill of our diplomats. We must always cherish and encourage that flow of ideas and idealism, and those rivers of soft power and influence that form such a large part of our role in the world.

It is also true that diplomatic negotiations for peace don’t simply arise automatically: they require extraordinary effort by individuals. Secretary Kerry, for example, deserves praise for his tireless work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He has chosen to devote weeks on end

trying to restart and conclude those negotiations, rather than taking the easy route of not attempting such a difficult task.

Individuals and the choices they make have an immense impact. Sometimes the individual is someone in high office, like William Pitt, who did his utmost in the early 1790s to avoid war with France, and whose state paper of 1805 was the basis for European peace for most of the 19th century. Or it is someone like Wilberforce, who was never a minister, but whose ideas and energy brought relief, an end of suffering and ultimately freedom for millions of people.

The coalition to end the British slave trade was motivated not just by moral considerations, but by political and economic factors. Adam Smith argued against slavery because he saw it as an inefficient allocation of resources. British naval supremacy in the world meant that in simple political terms, abolition was possible because we had the diplomatic and military muscle to enforce it. And Wilberforce was outraged that slaves had no opportunity to embrace Christianity, so their souls were being lost. So his key argument against the trade was neither economic nor political, it was religious.

It is inevitable that in this way governments, like individuals, are motivated by a number of different factors. But we must pursue the issues today that bring together the moral interest and the national interest, using the combination of powerful ideas, our strong institutions and our global role.

We should be proud that our country has kept its promise to spend 0.7% of our gross national income on international development, not just because it is morally right, but because it is profoundly in our national interest to help other nations lift their citizens out of poverty.

We have to continue to lead global efforts to stop the illegal wildlife trade, which destroys the natural heritage of African nations, undermines economic development, and creates instability.

It is vital that we promote a rules-based international system, because it nourishes the commerce, trade, and stability which are the lifeblood of our own economy as well as strengthening human rights internationally.

And it is essential that we support political reform, civil society, women’s rights and economic progress in the Middle East, because it is vital to our long-term security that that region becomes more free, more stable and more prosperous.

The pursuit of policies that bring stability in the world, and the moral authority for them, are inseparable from each other.

Any idea that we should retrench, withdraw or turn away from these issues is misguided and wrong, for 2 particular reasons:

First, the world is becoming systemically less stable. This is due to many different factors: the dispersal of power amongst a wider group of nations, many of whom do not fully share our values and our objectives in foreign policy; the diffusion of power away from governments, accelerated by technology; the globalisation of ideas, and ability of people to organise themselves into leaderless movements and spread ideas around the world within minutes; our inter-connectedness, a boon for development but also a major vulnerability, from terrorism and cyber-crime to the spread of diseases like Ebola; the growing global middle class, which is driving demand for greater accountability and more freedom within states designed to suppress such instincts; and the rise of religious intolerance in the Middle East. Global institutions are struggling to deal with these trends towards a systemically less stable world.

It is not enough to ensure there is no conflict on our own continent, although sadly the crisis in Ukraine is showing once again that even Europe is not immune. Conflict anywhere in the world affects us, through refugee flows, the crimes and terrorism that conflict fuels, and the billions of pounds needed in humanitarian assistance. So we have to address these issues.

The second reason is that the pursuit of sound development, inclusive politics and the rule of law, is essential to our moral standing in the world, which is in turn an important factor in our international influence. I pointed out many years ago that the US and UK suffered a loss of moral authority as a result of aspects of the War on Terror, which affected the standing of our foreign policy and the willingness of other countries to work with us, and which both President Obama's administration and our own government have worked hard to address. We are strongest when we act with moral authority, and that means being the strongest champions of our own values.

So neither as a matter of wise policy nor as a matter of conscience can Britain ever afford to turn aside from a global role. We have to continue to be restless advocates for improving the condition of humanity. This means continuing to forge new alliances, updating the

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and other global institutions, and enforcing the rules that govern international relations.

But that will never be enough by itself, so we also have to retain the ambition to influence not just the resolutions that are passed and the treaties that are signed, but the beliefs in the world about what is acceptable and what is not.

A powerful example of an issue on which we need to apply such leadership is the one I have been pursuing on the use of rape and sexual violence as weapons of war.

I have been surprised by how deeply-engrained and passive attitudes to this subject often are.

Because history is full of accounts of the mass abuse of women and captives, and because there is so much domestic violence in so many societies, it is a widely-held view that violence against women and girls is inevitable in peace time and in conflict.

But when we see

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foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, selling women as slaves and glorifying rape and sexual slavery;

When we hear of refugees, who have already lost everything, being raped in camps for want of basic protections;

When we see leaders exhorting their fighters to go out and rape their opponents, specifically to inflict terror, to make women pregnant, to force people to flee their homes, and to destroy their families and communities;

Or peace agreements giving amnesty to men who have ordered and carried out rape or deliberately turned a blind eye to it;

Or soldiers – and even peacekeepers – committing rape due to lack of discipline, proper training, no accountability, and a culture that treats women as the spoils of war, a commodity to be exploited with impunity;

When we consider all of this then we are clearly dealing with injustice on a scale that is simply intolerable, as well as damaging to the stability of those countries and the peace of the wider world.

It is often said to me that without war there would be no warzone rape, as if that is the only way to address the problem. While of course our goal is always to prevent conflict, we cannot simply consign millions of women, men and boys to the suffering of rape while we seek a way to put an end to all conflict, since as I have argued that this goal is one we should always strive for but may often not attain.

We have shown that we can put restraints on the way war is conducted. We have put beyond the pale the use of poison gas or torture, and devised the

Arms Trade Treaty

for the trade in illegal weapons. It is time to address this aspect of conflict, and to

treat sexual violence as an issue of global peace and security

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The biggest obstacle we face in this campaign is the idea you can't do anything about it – that you can't humanise hell, that there is nothing we can do to end warzone rape. But there is hope, and we must dispel this pessimism.

Over the last 2 years, working with

NGOs

, the

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and faith groups, we have brought the weight and influence of the United Kingdom to bear globally as no country ever has done before on this subject.

One hundred and fifty-five countries have now joined our campaign, and endorsed a global declaration of commitment to end sexual violence in conflict. We brought together over 120 governments and thousands of people at a

Global Summit in London this June

, the first of its kind. And in countries like the

DRC

, South Sudan and Colombia we are seeing signs of governments being prepared to address this issue by passing laws and by reforming their militaries.

I am continuing this campaign as the Prime Minister Special's Representative, and I will go on with it after I've left the House of Commons. I hope you will join me, and help us to change attitudes around the world and show that this goal is attainable.

What would it say about our commitment to human rights in our own society if we knew about such abuses but did nothing about it? And how could we be at the forefront of preventing conflict in the world if we didn't act to prevent something that causes conflict in the future? Sexual violence is often designed to make peace impossible to achieve and create the bitterness and incentive for future conflict. Dealing with it is not a luxury to be added on, it is an integral part of conflict prevention, a crucial part of breaking a cycle of war. And it has to go hand in hand with seeking the full political, social and economic empowerment of women everywhere, the greatest strategic prize of all for this century.

As we commemorate those who died in World War One and their suffering, there is no more fitting thing we can do than to face up to the hell of conflict in our lifetimes. We have never had to mobilise our population to fight in the way their generation did, and so we have been spared their painful burdens. But how much more incumbent does that make it on all of us, to fight with the peaceful tools at our disposal, on behalf of those who are denied through no fault of their own the security we consider our birthright.

Just as in Wilberforce's day, it will always be necessary for Britain to be at the forefront of efforts to improve the condition of humanity. The search for peace and an end to conflict requires powerful ideas and the relentless defence of our values, as much as it does negotiations and summits between nations.

We could be heading for such turbulent times that it will be easy for some people to say we shouldn't bother with development or tackling sexual violence in conflict or other such issues. There will always be the pressing crisis of the day that risks drowning out such long-term causes. But in fact addressing these issues is crucial to overcoming crises now and in the future – and it will be an increasingly important part of our moral authority and standing in the world that we are seen to do this.

Just because there are economic crises and major social changes, does not mean we or our partners can squander any day or any year in producing the ideas as well as the laws that prevent conflict and deal with some of the greatest scourges of the 21st century, and we must do so with confidence: for it remains the case that free and democratic societies are the only places where the ideas and the moral force we need can be found.

Our times call for a renewal of that effort – for just and equitable solutions to conflict, the driving down of global inequalities, and the confronting of injustices.

Every day we have to start again. There isn't going to be a day in our lifetimes when we can wake up and say that this work is all complete. We have to overcome the sense of helplessness that says that vast problems cannot be tackled. We have to awaken the conscience of nations and stir the actions of governments.

In an age of mass communication this is a task for every one of us. Whether we are in government, are diplomats, journalists, members of the armed forces, members of the public, students, faith groups, or civil servants, every one of us can be part of that effort.

In Britain, our restless conscience should never allow us to withdraw behind our fortifications and turn away from the world, but should always inspire us to strive for peace and security, to maintain our responsibilities, to seek new ways of addressing the worst aspects of human behaviour, and to live up to our greatest traditions.

Thank you very much.

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