

Museums, Peace, Democracy and Governance in the 21st Century

Sir Shridath Ramphal

Former Secretary General of the Commonwealth

Patron of the Commonwealth Association of Museums

I am sorry that a prior commitment prevents me from being with you in Barbados. Thank you for inviting me to be one of your first two Patrons; I am very pleased to be associated with a group whose contributions enrich the Commonwealth family.

Those who have worked for and with the Commonwealth are proud to belong to this interdependent human community which spans the globe. We have been working with each other, coming together voluntarily, guided by consensus and co-operation. These are the values which will determine the fate of the entire global community and the Commonwealth has a crucial role in upholding them.

This year we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the “new” Commonwealth. The agreement in London which led to the evolution of the modern Commonwealth discarded allegiance to the British Crown as the touchstone of Commonwealth membership, enabling countries which the decolonisation process had brought to freedom the option of adopting republican constitutions and still remain members of the Commonwealth.

This visionary arrangement, which was developed largely thanks to India’s first Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, enabled India to avoid the route which the newly independent Republic of Ireland had taken only months before when it turned its back on the Commonwealth. That “fateful and historic decision” was conceived by Nehru “in terms of the larger good of the world.”

Fifty years ago, hopes were high that by the end of this century, mankind would be moving into a new era that would be one of peace on Earth – an Earth which we could make a more just and habitable place. But as we approach the new millennium, it is foolhardy to be confident about that prospect. We have to accept that the great challenge which will face the world in the next century is how to fulfil the promise of co-operation through the United Nations, which the world made so many years ago. In a report issued by the Commission on Global Governance, which I had the honour to co-chair with Ingvar Carlsson, former Prime Minister of Sweden, we stated that the challenges which the world faced made it imperative that there should be common commitment by all nations and peoples to core values that all humanity could uphold: respect for life, liberty, justice and equity, mutual respect, caring and integrity. Without these values the world will never attain the longed-for dream of peace.

During the past fifty years, frequent wars have devastated countries and taken the lives of millions of people. By one estimate, between 1945 and 1989 there were 138 wars, resulting in some 23 million deaths. The ending of the Cold War a decade ago held out the false promise of

a peaceful world, but recent events have shown that while the risk of wars between states has diminished, several sources of discord originating within nations pose a formidable challenge to the world community.

The situation in the Balkans encapsulates all the historic and proximate factors which are inimical to peace or a peaceful solution of some of the many problems in the world. It had its genesis in post-Cold War manoeuvrings based on the personal ambitions of ethnic leaders, which brought about the collapse of an old regime and was exacerbated by ethnic, religious, economic and political antagonisms leading to full-scale war. The failure of the international community to take advantage of the facilities which the United Nations could offer to take preventive action has led to a near decade of slaughter in the region, with millions being driven from their homes in orgies of ethnic cleansing and other violent actions.

Powerful nations have now taken it upon themselves to ignore the United Nations and to intervene in internal conflict by waging destructive war and unleashing deadly weapons on one side or the other, killing innocent citizens and unleashing a tide of refugees to add to the millions of refugees already displaced and living mainly in third world countries. The promise expressed so eloquently by the founding fathers of the United Nations that its role would be to rid the world of the “scourge of war” and enable nations “to practise tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours” has been sadly dashed.

The quintessence of that promise was progress towards democracy in a peaceful global state; towards a world less susceptible to the usurpation of power on a global scale, less vulnerable to the imposition of one nation’s will; one, more hospitable to world order, more hostile to arbitrariness and compulsion. That promise has not been fulfilled and recent events, in all their horror, have underlined that fact.

We live in a world in which co-operation is no longer an option but a pre-condition of global survival; real co-operation on a global basis is indispensable if we want to maintain peace and order, expand economic activity, tackle pollution, check greenhouse warming, combat pandemic disease, curb the spread of weapons, prevent deserts growing, preserve genetic diversity, save species from extinction, deter terrorists, ward off famine, defeat the contagion of economic instability, win the war against drugs, and share scarce resources, like water.

The reality of the necessity for global co-operation to tackle these problems has brought issues of governance and democracy to the forefront of international discourse as the empowerment of people, and through that empowerment, the betterment of the human condition has been identified as one of the key issues which will face humanity in the new millennium. And we can no longer use the labels of governance and democracy as if they attach themselves only to countries and systems within countries.

The spread of democracy has been one of the most heartening trends of recent years. It is democracy that can ensure that a country’s affairs are conducted – and is development directed – in ways that respond to the interests and wishes of the people. Democracy provides the environment within which the fundamental rights of citizens are best safeguarded. It offers the

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most favourable foundation for peace and stability in international relations. Though democratic regimes may not all or always be virtuous, even recent history suggests that autocratic regimes are more likely to behave aggressively to others besides acting repressively towards their own citizens.

The growth of a democratic culture is, however, not an instant or easy process. While many parties may emerge quickly and electors embrace their new opportunities with enthusiasm, the traditions of democratic behaviour and the institutions that support them take time to become established. Efforts to broaden the understanding of the norms, rules and guidelines that apply to democratic processes are extremely important. It is also necessary to strengthen national capacity to develop the full range of democratic institutions, which includes the responsibilities of the media, the rights and obligations of the opposition and government, voter registration, the functioning of electoral laws, the role of the military and police forces, and the concept of democracy in the widest sense.

It is ironic that the call for democracy and good governance is not always matched by an understanding that while they create an enabling environment for human development, economic development is itself necessary for sustained democracy and good governance. History has taught us that no society – national or international – can be sustained if power, privilege and prosperity are the prerogatives of a few, with deprivation, degradation and despair the lot of many.

In a general sense, it is probably true that insecurity is the cause of all conflict. The unspoken premise of that proposition is that by “insecurity” we mean a threat to physical security, violence of all kinds, aggression from beyond borders, oppression from within them. But “insecurity” has another face, and for many people, it is not aggression or oppression that strikes terror in their hearts and devastates their lives – it is poverty; the human insecurity of impoverishment – all the more intolerable when it occurs in the midst of plenty – today blights the lives of hundreds of millions of people. Their insecurities may be less dramatic than the physical insecurities of war and repression. But they are all real and as pressing – and represent for them the most blatant denial of their rights as human beings and the most urgent need for redress.

Today, as many as 1.3 billion people in the developing world live below the poverty line, over a billion have no access to even basic social services: primary health care, basic education, safe water; 800 million do not have enough food, 500 million are chronically malnourished. As many as 1.6 billion people are now worse off than they were 15 years ago. In 19 countries, per capita income is lower than it was even as far back as 1960.

The gap between the rich and the poor is widening every day. More than one billion people live on an income of less than US\$1 per day and as many as two billion on less than US\$2 per day. Can the seeds of conflict be more firmly planted? Is it any wonder that the sense of helplessness and hopelessness should lead ineluctably to conflict and in the end to violent conflict? And then the world seems surprised when such conflicts erupt and scrambles for rapid

responses to the symptoms while ignoring the root causes – underdevelopment, the debt burdens of developing countries, the downward pressure on the prices of commodities which are the economic mainstays of most developing countries, and the global financial crisis.

When we talk of governance and democracy we have to look beyond narrow national definitions and instead look to governance and democracy within the global society. An important development which has characterised the last decades of this millennium has been the emergence of a vigorous civil society. It is a development greatly assisted by the communications revolution which has facilitated interaction around the world. Important non-governmental organisations and movements have existed for as long as the modern state, but the size, diversity and international influence of civil society organisations have grown dramatically during the past five decades.

The new vigour of civil society reflects a large increase in the capacity and will of people to take control of their own lives and to improve to transform them. The number and proportion of people who can make their voices heard is vastly greater in all parts of the world today than, say, fifty years ago. This is principally the product of decolonisation, economic improvement and the spread of democracy.

Non-governmental organisations such as yours have a special responsibility to become instruments of change, nationally and globally. You now have the opportunity to contribute to governance – influencing decisions, building partnerships, pooling information, knowledge and skills to enhance your capacities to advance the issues which concern you.

You have undertaken the worthy task of encouraging the development of a museum culture in Commonwealth countries, to assist future generations to know their history and culture and to take pride in the achievements of their forebears. Museums have an important role to play in enshrining the ethos of their societies and there will be a particular challenge for the museum makers of today to reflect as honestly as possible the true cultural values of many of our societies which have survived the decimation of their people, oppression, and cultural imperialism. The task which you face therefore, will be to enable people everywhere to treasure the past and enrich the future. It is a noble task and I am pleased that you have asked me to this occasion. I wish you well in you endeavours at this most important seminar.

Delivered in absentia.