

Politics as a Vocation and The Art of Peacebuilding

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Keynote Address to the Sixth Congress of the King Prajadhipok's Institute on Culture of Peace and Sustainable Democracy

Bangkok 5-7 November, 2004

INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by thanking the King Prajadhipok Institute for doing me the honour of delivering the keynote address at the sixth KPI congress before this large, varied and distinguished audience.

I particularly welcome the invitation because I am an admirer of KPI. In my travels around the world, I search eagerly for organizations that do the kind of work that the PARLIAMENTARY CENTRE does. When I find them I embrace them like long lost brothers and sisters.

Years ago, even before KPI was formally established by Parliament, I was fascinated to discover its early programs to strengthen the role played by Thai parliamentarians. In Canada we have learned much from KPI about how to develop and deliver such programs.

Since it was established, KPI has grown into a strong organization that interprets its mandate broadly. Although KPI continues to focus on working with Parliament, it addresses a wide variety of critical development and governance needs in Thailand. KPI has recognized a fundamental truth: the strength of Parliament is connected to the overall health of constitutional democracy in Thailand.

KPI and its supporters learned the lesson of earlier efforts at democratic development in Thailand - the hardest work begins after the constitution is written. These founding documents must be turned into working institutions that serve the needs of the people and help build confidence in the constitution as a living reality. Partly through KPI's work, the great experiment in Thai constitution building has come to be known and admired world wide.

In that same spirit of tackling the critical issues facing Thailand and the world, this Sixth KPI Congress is devoted to peace-building and sustainable democracy. These words entered the mainstream of international discourse in the early 1990s following the end of the cold war. They were part of an effort to fashion a new global agenda consisting of development, environment, democracy and peace. They were an affirmation of the hope that the world community could come together and successfully tackle these great human challenges in a cooperative, constructive spirit. For a brief period, beating swords into ploughshares seemed a practical undertaking.

Over the past fifteen years, those hopes have been dampened considerably. The swords have been unsheathed time and again. In Africa, violent conflict has blighted the

prospects for both democracy and development. Eastern Europe, which had been the epicentre of world hope in 1990, became the scene of terrible ethnic conflicts. In the Middle East we see old conflicts and hatreds renewed, intensified and expanded. Some even speak of new conflicts of civilization, although that seems to be an example of the rhetorical overkill for which the modern age is famous.

The global goals which were so hopefully proclaimed in the 1990s appear to be receding into the future.

The Millennium Development Goal of halving world poverty by 2015 seems unlikely to be achieved.

Agenda for Peace set out bold new ideas for international security cooperation, fired by a responsibility to protect. The utter failure to protect Rwandans, the invasion of Iraq, the halting response to Sudan, these and other setbacks have raised doubts about our ability to make even modest progress towards systems of cooperative security.

Agenda for Democracy is the third of the great agendas proclaimed by the United Nations in the 90s. But many countries have settled into systems of quasi-authoritarianism, with powerful remnants of unchecked state power.

For many, these appear to be sad days for democracy and peace, another case of ideals being mugged by reality. But we should not be so quick to despair. Without parading a long list of contrary examples, it is not hard to find instances of solid progress. Let me just cite three from this region of the world.

1. Thailand has moved beyond a period of chronic military intervention in state affairs and entered a new era of constitutional development. Thailand is affirming that democracy and development can live side by side.
2. Indonesia, in part inspired by the Thai example, has now set itself on the same path of combining democracy and development.
3. In China, the Communist Party insists that it must retain a monopoly of political power but the society is opening up and there are more opportunities to express discontent with the way government works, so long as you don't say that the system itself is at fault.

In citing these examples, it occurs to me that Asia may become a great leader in discovering answers to the challenges of democracy, development and peace, answers that suit the 21st century. Asia may find new ways of reconciling freedom and order, individualism and community, country and world. Some of the unease felt in the West at this moment in history may have to do with the shift in world power towards this part of the world. Let us hope that Asia and the world can manage this shift without the cataclysmic violence of the 20th century. Let us hope that it expresses itself more in terms of human creativity than the power to destroy.

Whether you are feeling hopeful or discouraged about democracy and peace these days, we can all agree that there is much work to be done. The transition to sustainable peace and democracy is not impossible, just far slower and harder than we believed. The transition from making the peace to building the peace is slow and uncertain, as is

the movement from electoral to constitutional democracy. Such changes are not made by great leaps of inspiration or logic. They come about with frustrating slowness through the painful, often wasteful but finally hopeful trials and errors of history.

POLITICS AS A VOCATION

Democracy is the worst of all systems of government except for the others that have been tried. (Churchill)

I have been asked to speak today on the theme of peace-building and sustainable democracy. I would like instead to turn that statement around to read democracy and sustainable peace-building.

My reason for doing so is to liberate democracy from its image as the weak and sickly child in the family of peace, development and democracy. So often in discussing these issues, democracy is described as what social scientists call a dependent variable, that is a force that is affected by other forces far more than it affects them. Democracy, we are told, depends on a minimum state of economic development. And it also depends on security and order first being established. It can be swept aside by any number of adverse conditions from crime to ethnic strife to the sheer boredom and indifference of the population. Conversely, it is not clear if democracy has much of an effect on other things, like peace or economic development. At best say the statisticians, the evidence is unclear.

This line of thinking is music to the ears of autocrats who keep telling people that democracy is on its way but you will have to wait until the rest of the public policy agenda is finished. Of course that may be a long time and we are reminded by Keynes that in the long run we are all dead. So I think we had better be careful about buying into this picture of democracy as the weak and sickly child.

Democracy, I would assert, is one of the great independent variables in history, as powerful as science and technology to take two of our favourite drivers of history. I would say it may be even more powerful than science and technology. After all, science only really becomes a power in history when it is widely believed that every human being has a right to use and develop their intelligence. That's a democratic idea.

But I am getting ahead of myself. I have made these bold claims for democracy without even telling you what I think it is.

When the word democracy is used, images of elections and parliaments and political parties immediately come to mind. And indeed those things are all part of democracy. But I would say that they bear the same relationship to democracy that laboratories and scientific journals do to science. They are the outward manifestation of something quite different. In the case of science that something different is the scientific method. In the case of democracy it is politics. To do science rather than merely report it or support it, you must practice the scientific method. Similarly, to do democracy rather than merely teach it or proclaim it, you must do politics.

Many see the scientific method as the greatest invention in history, I see democratic politics as every bit as important.

What I am saying is heresy to many because we have gotten so used to thinking of politics as blight, a curse and parasite on society. People say democracy yes, that is a noble ideal but politics no, it is a mean, low and dishonest business. The belief is so strong and widespread that some people are trying to develop systems of democracy without politics. In Canada it is called direct democracy because it would go over and around the politicians directly to the people. And we are told that technology finally makes this way of doing democracy feasible: everyone can now participate in making the great decisions via the internet in the comfort of their own homes. Best of all, they would be undisturbed by their neighbours or by having to argue with people with other points of view.

Direct democracy is dangerous fantasy. In his classic study *The Crowd*, Gustave LeBon describes highly disburged, disconnected citizens as the perfect material for moulding into crowds that can be manipulated by demagogic leaders. In the case of direct democracy in the modern world, the unassembled crowd would consist of millions and millions of couch potatoes who could vote on issues of the day during commercial breaks in football games.

The point I want to make is simply this: no politics no democracy. It is as simple as that. For readings that make this case more persuasively and eloquently than I can provide it, I recommend two classics of political thought: *Politics as a Vocation* by the great German sociologist Max Weber and *In Defence of Politics* by the British political scientist Bernard Crick. Both make the same argument. for all its shortcomings and limitations, politics is the stuff of democracy; and the threats to democracy come from those who argue that we can have democracy while doing away with politics and politicians. In the place of politics, these “true democrats” offer ideology, the opiate of the people in the modern world. Whether it is nationalism or capitalism or communism or khmerism or facism or Stalinism or Peronism, the isms all have one thing in common: the claim that there is no need for public debate because the vision is clear.

Having made the claim that democracy is essentially about politics, I would now like to say something about politics and peace.

POLITICS AND PEACE

It is better to jaw jaw than to waw, waw. (Churchill)

Politics is competition for power in pursuit of public goods. As such, politics can be the most potent and constructive form of peace-building. But politics can also mutate into the most potent and destructive form of conflict building. Let's begin with a few example of the dark side of politics.

Two countries far removed from one another – Bangladesh and Angola – illustrate the difficulties of converting democracy into peace.

In the case of Bangladesh, the war of independence of the 1970s continue to cast a dark shadow over Bangladesh politics, which some call “the parliament of the streets”. It features hartals (work stoppages) demonstrations and high levels of political violence. One MP I interviewed in 1999 told me that most Members of Parliament were afraid to return to their constituencies for fear of being attacked or murdered by their political opponents. To deal with this danger, political parties have gradually built up their own

gangs of thugs-for-hire, and since all parties do this the political violence spreads and becomes endemic.

A key point made repeatedly by those I interviewed was that Bangladesh politics rests on authoritarian, leader-dominated parties organized and run as political dynasties. These dynasties have been headed for the past generation by two women leaders, one the daughter of the assassinated father of the country, the other the widow of another assassinated President of the country. Tremendous effort goes into keeping the grievances of the past fresh and alive in the memories of the people.

This form of political competition has an important side effect: it is essentially devoid of policy content and provides the people with little opportunity to participate meaningfully in the making of decisions of concern to them. But then, as one Minister of the Government remarked to me, "politics is for the educated elite not for the people."

The current transition to peace in Angola illustrates that a legacy of violent conflict may not be transformed into peace by democratic politics but rather continue as thinly disguised authoritarianism accompanied by high levels of political violence and corruption. As described in a report by Conciliation Resources, the resolution of the Angolan conflict was achieved through a relentless military campaign by government forces that eventually resulted in the killing of the leader of the opposition on the battlefield and the collapse of the opposition. Perhaps not surprisingly, the post-war system consists of the MPLA government and the social groups that support it having virtually a free hand in the political arena, but also socially and economically as well.

In summing up the lessons of the Angolan case to date, the report has this to say about the challenge of transforming national liberation movements. "They not only aim to liberate the nation from colonial rule but equally to speak for the nation as a whole, in other words to be the only legitimate representative of all individual subjects."

Some analysts say that such outcomes are just what one would expect from histories of violent conflict of the kind that Angola and Bangladesh have suffered. In other words, dysfunctional democracy is just the weak sickly offspring of violence and not of conscious political choice for which leaders should be held accountable. In my view that lets political leaders off the hook for deliberately choosing forms of politics that seek private advantage at great public expense. We might call it predatory politics featuring the capture and looting of the state.

To underscore the point that politics is always about making choices for which both leaders and supporters should be accountable. I offer the example of a country where politics took a wrong turn without the excuse of a long history of violence. Sri Lanka is the country I am referring to. In the post war period, Sri Lanka was one of the most promising developing countries. It served as a model of comparatively equitable, peaceful and democratic development. But forty years later, Sri Lanka is struggling to extricate itself from the calamity of a civil war that claims the grim distinction of having invented suicide bombing.

Though there had long been tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities and some degree of violence, there is no reason to believe that with wise leadership and constructive politics these tensions could not have been managed well short of civil war. But fateful choices were made by political leaders to seek the short term political

advantages of communally based nationalism. Thereafter bit by bit inter communal suspicion grew into hatred and violence that culminated in a twenty year civil war. Only the most fervent believer in historical determinism would say that outcome had to be.

If politics sometimes fails countries when they need it most – at early points in their economic and social development – the same can happen to the so-called mature democracies. The western democracies are suffering a steady decline of public confidence in politics as reflected in rapidly dropping participation rates. Canada has long prided itself on having a much more engaged citizenry than our American neighbours but we achieved the dubious distinction in the last election of having more of our eligible voters choose not to vote than to cast a ballot. Some say this reflects satisfaction with the status quo but I believe it reflects declining confidence in and commitment to citizenship.

Declining rates of public participation raise serious issues of democratic legitimacy, especially when it comes to major issues such as the decision to go to war. Consider this: whoever wins the US Presidency – and we will know who by the time I deliver this speech – that persons will have been elected by less than a quarter of eligible American voters. If you throw into this equation charges of partisan dirty tricks in managing the election, you have the beginnings of a crisis of confidence in US democracy.

The deformities of politics leading to declining public confidence are the result of choice by those who do politics in countries like Canada and the United States. A widely held belief is that there is little point in voting because money talks in politics and those with the most money talk the loudest. One of the most significant decisions taken by a recent Canadian politician was when former Prime Minister Chretien's brought forward – against considerable political opposition - legislation that publicly funds political parties and further restricts financial contributions by corporations and unions. This is one important step towards weakening the connection between money and politics in Canada.

I have offered examples of how politics can worsen conflict but I would emphasise that politics can be enormously constructive and supportive of peace as well. The point is there can be no lasting peace without constructive politics. Consider the case of Northern Ireland where peace is gradually and painfully being built by a political process – messy, painful and slow but with the promise at the end of a day of a peace that will hold. The politics that have gone into that peace-building effort included people and leader politics, bitterly confrontation and negotiated politics, short term and far sighted politics. But without the politics there would be no peace.

Let me conclude this part of my remarks by being repetitious: politics is the essential tool for managing conflict. This fact is too often disregarded because, as I said earlier, democratic politics is seen as the weak and sickly child of economic military or other forces. I see democratic politics more as the head of the family, and to be held accountable as such. There are of course people who would agree with me but then say it doesn't matter because all politics is bad politics and totally incapable of being reformed or improved. I think politics is as much open to improvement as any other area of human endeavour and in the same way – slowly, painfully and with much trial and error. What is required is for us to believe in practical political progress, the final subject to which I now turn.

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

As noted earlier, it has been said by Churchill and repeated by everyone else that democracy is the worst form of government except for all of the others that have been tried. Similarly, it could be said that international cooperation in democracy building is the worst way to strengthen democracy except for the other ways that have been tried.

Certainly, we are seeing once again that invasion and occupation are neither humane nor cost effective ways of going about the job, and for reasons that are perhaps worth mentioning even if they are self-evident. This most interventionist form of democracy promotion – assuming that is the motivation - destroys the very conditions needed to make democratic politics possible, namely the free expression of the will of the people. The fact that the destruction of these conditions is then followed by sincere and earnest attempts by the invaders and occupiers to recreate the conditions does little to improve the prospects for either democracy or peace.

The alternative ways of strengthening democracy have not been brilliant successes, although they have the advantage of wasting nothing more precious than money and time. In the past several years, a number of quite comprehensive studies have been carried out on international cooperation in democracy strengthening. In general they conclude that these efforts have been of modest value, though sometimes they have been useless and occasionally downright harmful. A recent study commissioned by the Swedish International Development Agency summarizes five lessons learned in the field of strengthening the key political institutions of elections, parties and parliaments. The five lessons are as follows:

1. Support to strengthen political institutions is to a large extent about how to promote a change in power relations between the executive and legislative branches of power.
2. It is important that agencies supporting democratic change conduct more thorough analyses in order to understand where the real power in society lies.
3. It is important to promote coherence, harmonization and complementarity among assistance programs.
4. The promotion of democracy should not be about reproducing the institutions of donor countries but to nurture core political processes and democratic values.
5. Relations with partners should be characterized by openness, transparency and participatory methods

My own reading of our experience at the Parliamentary Centre in working with parliaments in Canada and around the world both supports and differs from these kinds of studies. Generally speaking I think the right lessons have been learned but I worry that they will not be learned in the right way. There is a move to evaluate democratic development in a results based framework that is more appropriate to public administration than to democratic politics. It cannot be said too often or emphatically that management and politics are two very different things and need to be for a strong democracy to grow. A successful state needs a highly competent professional public service but equally it needs vital, open, competitive, issue driven politics that engages the people. The trouble is that democratic politics is a messy complex and contradictory

business that does not lend itself very well to organization charts and flow charts and results based frameworks. Nor should it.

Max Weber – to whom I referred earlier - warned a century ago about the dangers of the growing trend to professionalize politics, the main danger being the isolation of leaders and alienation of the people from the political process. That's why he argued that politics should be seen as a vocation rather than a profession. I would say that the danger he warned of has largely come to pass and with the consequence he feared. Politics and politicians are now surrounded by an infrastructure of professional political advisers – speech writers, spindoctors and pollsters – who have the effect of insulating and isolating leaders from the people and from the democratic politics that is their life blood.

There is of course no easy answer to this problem because the politics of the 21st century are far more complex and fast paced than the politics of the late 19th century which Weber knew. Still the danger is real. Citizens in democracies are coming to have less and less confidence that genuine, direct contact with their leaders is possible or that what comes out of the mouths of politicians is what they actually think and believe.

When all political discourse comes to be seen as propaganda democracy breaks down. As Orwell argues in “Politics and the English Language”, democracy depends on public confidence in language because the spoken word is the main tool of politics. When people routinely believe that what politicians say is a misrepresentation of what they mean, they begin to lose any reason for listening or speaking back. In other words they lose confidence in the value of democratic citizenship.

Many of the most critical challenges facing democratic politics are more of this kind than of the technical kind that many current democracy building programs address, for example how to run elections, how to organize parliamentary business. I think that is important work but when we lose sight of why we do it, there is a danger of reinforcing the problem I have been talking about – reducing politics to a peculiar kind of profession most citizens cannot and will not relate to.

What is required I think is not so much to tackle new subjects or to undertake new activities. What we need to do is approach all our work with one thing in mind – the central importance of democratic politics. So if we are trying to strengthen parliamentary committees, we concentrate on whether they encourage genuine political deliberation not just whether they meet frequently and have well run meetings. If we are trying to strengthen elections, we look beyond election machinery and procedures to whether a real political exchange is taking place between the citizens and the politicians, one that genuinely helps voters make informed choices. And in trying to strengthen political parties, perhaps we should think a bit less about how to organize a campaign and more about whether the political parties are genuinely democratic organizations seeking to engage citizens in politics.

In closing, I would stress that the strength of democracy and its ability to manage conflict depend on the vitality of politics which is the heart and soul of democracy. Our mission as democracy promoters should therefore be first last and always – strengthening democratic politics.

IN CLOSING

I look forward very much to meeting and talking with many of you over the next two days.

My thanks once again to the King Prajadhipok Institute for this opportunity to speak to you.

And my sincere thanks to all of you for your attention.

Thank you very much.