

The State of the Debate

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Something quite extraordinary is happening to the quality of political debate in Western political culture. This sound bite, deceitful, trivialized bombardment by one side of the argument that just diminishes the quality of all our discussion and decision-making and our rationality in our civilization is spreading across the Atlantic in a very worrying way, because the world's in a lot of trouble, in my view. I think this is an era of enormous challenge – of poverty, of threats to the environment, of the total instability of the Middle East, which although we're in a moment of optimism, I don't think we're in a time of solution. And yet, we are bombarded with a few slogans and anyone who dissents is treated as an idiot and marginalized and so on. Very dangerous. Very dangerous times.

So an invitation to come to the U.S. and debate these questions I accepted where we've got a week without Parliament before we go into the last few weeks before our general election is called. We don't have fixed dates, as you probably know, but everybody knows we're aiming for May 5th. So the election will probably be called at the beginning of April. And the state of Britain is that the country believes it was deceived and lied to about the war in Iraq, that it was an error, that the rush to war was wrong, that the failure to prepare for afterwards was criminally negligent, the loss of life of the Iraqis and of American soldiers and our own soldiers is a disgrace and a risk that shouldn't have been taken, and that the state of the Middle East is very, very dangerous. I don't know if you know this – and I think the debate on the whole Israel-Palestine situation in this country is not a free debate, so that people in Europe when polled thought that Israel is the greatest danger to the state of peace in the world – which I think you'd find shocking here. But it's the general view of the population of Europe.

So in Britain, we're going into an election where our Prime Minister has lost respect and lost trust, but we have a Labor government that has massively reduced unemployment, spent a lot of money on reducing child poverty, put a lot of money into public health and education, and an opposition party that doesn't favor social programs that would make the country less unequal and was even more gung-ho for war in Iraq. So the country's feeling very cynical, disillusioned, likely to turn out in low numbers in the election because the thing that's bothering it so much

can't come into the political arena as a thing to be resolved. And we'll see. The worry of the government is that the turnout will be very low because people are cynical, and that could affect the outcome.

So I've come just to take up the debate and to join with those of you who are anxious to discuss the state the world is in and what we can do better. And just to take up the argument – I hear it used all the time – America is in an aggressive posture in the Middle East in order to spread democracy because democracies don't go to war.

But that is repeated, as you know. And there should be a belly laugh. What happened in Iraq and what's happened in Fallujah.

Now, the case I want to make is that the world – I'll come to the Middle East – but the world is in very, very serious trouble. There are 6 billion people in the world. There were a billion people – just over – probably 1.2 billion, the demographers tell us, in 1900. And that was probably as many people as had ever existed since human beings evolved 160,000 years ago in what is now called Ethiopia. By 1960, there were 3 billion of us. Now, there's 6 billion of us. And by 2020-2030, there's going to be 9 billion. So in just over 100 years, going from a billion to 9 billion people is a fantastic strain on the resources of the world and our organizational capacity.

Of the 6 billion of us, one in five is abjectly poor – not enough to eat, seeing a lot of their children die before the age of – one in five of diarrhea, measles. Nearly a fifth of the world's population still illiterate – no chance of education, of basic health care. And half of humanity living on less than the local purchasing parity of what \$2 a day would buy in the U.S. – half of humanity – in a time when population's growing and global communications are ever-improving. So people see each other much more clearly across the world and yet we've got these gross inequalities. And in our kind of societies, increasing problems of obesity and the illnesses of heart disease and diabetes and of riches and of out-of-control materialism that's creating a demoralization of lack of meaning in our kind of societies. More and more material consumption, but not a satisfied, a proud and dignified society. And the diseases of riches.

And, of course, going with all of this is the strains on the environment and the world, most particularly, in global warming. And we just had – I don't know if it got any publicity here, but Tony Blair asked for a meteorological office to call together the world's meteorologists to take a look at where we are on global warming because Britain is now in the Chair of the G7 and Tony Blair declared that doing something about global warming would be one of his priorities, the other being the state of Africa. And the world's climate scientists came together and said that the situation is very much more serious than was thought at the time of the last panel, the third panel of scientists brought together by the U.N. – that the danger of the Antarctic losing lots of its ice and sea levels rising is now much greater than we thought previously and it's going to happen much more rapidly, and that the sea, the oceans are absorbing carbon dioxide for us, but it's changing them from their alkaline nature to acidity, which means corals are being destroyed, plankton is dying, and there's a real danger that we lose a lot of sea life, fisheries and so on.

So I don't know – again, I know you have a government that seems to deny – well, I think they've now conceded that global warming is a problem. There was a period of denial. I think there's now an acknowledgement that there's a problem but a refusal to cooperate with the rest of the world in addressing the problem.

So I think that the problems of growing population with mass problems of poverty, and 90% of the new population, the extra 3 billion people that are going to be with us by 2020 to 2050, will be in the poorest countries, is an enormous challenge to the future of this planet and all of us. And it's not just a challenge to the poor countries. The world is so globally integrated now – and obviously it's the biggest moral challenge, but just in terms of the threat of disorder and environmental chaos and mass movements of refugees and so on, the threat will face all of us. And the modern, successful economy has to be an open economy. And if you're living in a world of increasing chaos, it will affect all of us economically as well as morally.

So I think this is the world we're in. These are the challenges we face. In the post-Cold War world, we need to look for agreed, powerful multilateral institutions, fair international rules, the sharing of technology, the promotion of development, and good, effective, modern government so that the people of the world can lift themselves up and we can share the right to pollute the planet more evenly and face these crises together. And instead, we've had a turning away from that enormously challenging agenda, but where we could make progress, to I think the invention of the War on Terror as the organizing principle of international politics in a way which is exacerbating that very problem.

As you know, most people in your country continue to believe that Al Qaeda was organized in Iraq, and that is a complete lie. The people of Europe and Britain were not – we do have the BBC, which might be why it came under attack afterwards. You can't go that far in deceiving people in Britain. But Al Qaeda is now in Iraq. All the expert analysis is the rage and anger of young people across the Middle East and the hatred for the United States of America – and of course Britain coming in second now in many countries in that hatred league – is so great that support for violent resistance movements is growing and strengthening across the world. And it just is. And therefore, if the attack on Iraq was meant to deal with that problem, apart from all the chaos and trouble and suffering it's caused in Iraq, it has exacerbated the problem. There's no question about it. And the problem is very much more serious.

We're in a moment, a bubble of optimism, because there've been the elections for a constituent assembly, so that the Iraqi people can draw themselves up a constitution. Let's all defer to Grand Ayatollah Sistani. It was not the intention of either U.N. advice or the U.S. Administration that there should be any elections for a constituent assembly. There were going to be consultations in towns, as took place in Afghanistan in the first stage. He insisted on the elections because, of course, he wanted to assert what a significant proportion of the population, the Shi'ia people of the south, are. And they voted in big numbers, as did the Kurds in the north. And voting is always moving, especially for a people who haven't been allowed to have free votes. I still remember my first vote. There's something incredibly moving about it and we were suitably moved.

But let's not kid ourselves. One, we owe it to Grand Ayatollah Sistani. And secondly, the risks of the country being more divided have been enlarged, and the resistance has not gone away. You will know that the Society of Muslim Scholars has said that if there could be a negotiation about an end to the occupation, then they would call for an end to all violent resistance. That's the way forward, in my view.

But similarly, in Israel-Palestine, yes, the Intifada which caused such horrendous suffering for both peoples – and of course more Palestinian civilians lost their life than Israel civilians – but what terrible suffering and fear on both sides – there is a cease-fire. But I don't believe this is going to lead to a settlement because Prime Minister Sharon is saying he'll withdraw from Gaza but not open its border with Egypt or its freedom to use its sea or its air space. And then he's going to take half the West Bank and not acknowledge the Palestinians' rights to East Jerusalem. If that is so, there won't be a settlement. There'll be a pause. There'll be a drawing of breath. And the resistance will go on some other way, perhaps the Palestinian people saying that the people of the Middle East must assist them.

The tragedy of all this is that a second one is available. If America would back two states, which the majority of the Palestinian and Israeli people want, on the basis of '67 boundaries, East Jerusalem being the capital of the Palestinian state – and these aren't inventions – this is international law because you can't retain territory occupied by force – and a settlement on all the refugees in some kind of package – the right to return or for people to settle. We could have peace. And then we could have all WMD out of the region, but that would include Israel's nukes. And then to Syria and Iran and the rest, a strong inspection regime. And you could have an opening up of the region and a period of development and progress. I feel we're not going to go there. And therefore lots of young people in the Middle East will decide that only the use of force will resist what's coming and on and on it will go.

So we've got a world divided desperately by poverty – really serious threats to all of us of continuing environmental degradation. And this isn't generations ahead. This is 20, 30 years when some of the catastrophic effect. A whole continent of Africa that is still getting significantly poorer. Everyone talking about Darfur, and this Administration having called it genocide, but no mandate for an African Union-led, U.N.-mandated force that can stop the violence, and so the killing and the dying is continuing. And the U.S., the world's only hegemonic power – we're in a period when we don't have a balance of power. We have one massively rich and armed country that is increasingly loathed, hated, and detested across the world, and a weakening of our multilateral institutions. And the United Nations. Yes, it needs updating. And it was this great country that put enormous energy into the creation of the United Nations at the end of the Second World War, but without it, might is right. And the violence of the powerful gives us Afghanistan and Iraq, which are hardly peace and success. But the violence of the unpowerful is what is called terrorism.

And of course the consequences for your country in terms of over-stretch, your armed forces, the lives of your people, the costs of these actions, the weakness of your public services, and the inequality of your country is an old, old story that makes people talk about ancient Rome. So I think this is a tragedy. We're living at a time with such global communications, such knowledge, such technology that put to use in a just world order, that treated everyone with

justice and faced some of the challenges the world is facing environmentally and in terms of poverty could give us all a meaning and could really move the world forward. And the U.S., with its history, should be at the forefront of that. And instead, it's leading us backwards in a way that's a tragedy for you and for my own country, of course, because we've gone there with you. Thank you.