

The excitement and the power of ideas  
João Carlos Espada

Thank you very much, Marc, for your very kind and touching words. And thank you above all for your friendship and support over all these years — 24 years, in fact, because I believe we first met in 1996, two years before you first came to our Arrábida Meetings in 1998. (And I will come back to this first encounter of ours in a minute).

And thank you all, Ladies and Gentlemen, for being with us at this online encounter. Today, June 24, we would in fact be at the closing day of the 28th edition of the Estoril Political Forum at the Palace Hotel in Estoril. And therefore I thought it would be nice to bring together in my study room several pictures of Winston Churchill and one of our annual group photo sessions — I hope you can see them at the background and that they bring us all happy memories of our gatherings in Arrábida and in Estoril (where, as you may recall, we always have a picture of Churchill at every session).

Now, on the topic of our tradition of annual meetings in Arrábida and in Estoril since 1993, I am afraid I could speak for hours. But I don't want to bother you. The main point I would like to make is that all these 27 years were not the result of a plan, or of a trick, or of a plot, or of a conspiracy.

Petit minds nowadays fill the so-called 'social media' with insidious stories about conspiracies. I am delighted to say two things about this: first, I don't use social media, I just rely on good friends who keep me aware of what is going on over there; second, I am particularly delighted to say that our tradition of annual meetings since 1993 has nothing to do with plans, plots or power politics.

We were fewer than 20 participants in Arrábida in 1993. Last year, in June 2019, we have had 749 registered participants at the Estoril Palace Hotel. How did this happen? Very simply, in my view, by the excitement of ideas. We came together in 1993 because we shared the attachment and curiosity about some ideas that were not vulgar. And our meetings have grown because more and more people have been attracted by these ideas. The same ideas have been the source of the launch of our Institute for Political Studies at the Catholic University of Portugal in 1996: we had 40 students at the MA program that we launched in 1996. We now have 400 students within our BA, MA and PhD programmes.

Ideas indeed were at the root of the launching of all these undertakings. In 1993, I was invited to promote a week-long course in Political Theory in Arrábida by Bernardino Gomes — an Atlanticist Portuguese socialist that I had vaguely met through another Atlanticist socialist, the then President Mario Soares. But we were not close — and I was not a socialist. He simply found some common ground on our mutual attachment to the West.

In 1996 I was invited to launch a program in Politics at the Catholic University by Mário Pinto — whom I barely knew, and I was not a member of the Catholic University. Mário Pinto simply thought that there was common ground between us, mainly because of my liberal opposition to jacobinism and the so-called ‘enlightened despotism’, as well as my liberal opposition to nihilism.

Also in 1996 I met Marc Plattner — who decided to come to Portugal to attend a lecture by Samuel Huntington, whom I had invited to launch a Lecture series called ‘The Democratic Invention’, which was the inauguration of the Mário Soares Foundation. I had never met either Huntington or Plattner — but a deep friendship with Marc emerged from that encounter. Marc even decided to replicate ‘The Democratic Invention’ lecture series in Washington a couple of years later.

All these three encounters happened obviously not because of plans, but because of ideas. It is difficult to define the ideas that have generated this tremendous excitement — and we should always be skeptical about definitions, as **Karl Popper**, one of our great mentors, used to say. I would nevertheless tentatively submit three main topics:

**In the first place, a clear and uncompromising attachment to liberal democracy**, including market economies, checks and balances, and personal liberty, — basically defined as absence of coercion by others, as **Isaiah Berlin**, another of our great mentors, has recalled.

**Next, a clear and uncompromising attachment to the Atlantic Alliance** as the bulwark of liberal democracy and the Free World. We have from the outset been very clear about our attachment to the Western tradition of Liberty under Law, and we have always made clear that this pluralistic tradition is rooted in Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. And it undoubtedly includes the great American liberal democracy — as **Alexis de Tocqueville**, another of our great mentors, has taught us.

Last but certainly not least, we have always made clear **our attachment to the classical understanding of the Idea of a University as a place of learning** — as **Michael Oakeshott**, another of our great mentors, used to say. This means the understanding of a University as a place for the pursuit of **Truth, the Good and the Beautiful** — and not as a place of propaganda. This means the stern defense of **Free Speech** and the stern refuse of tribalism and of collectivism. This also means the engagement in an on-going pluralistic conversation and the refusal of ideological warfare among *unfortunate dichotomies*, as **Ralf Dahrendorf**, another of our great mentors, used to say.

To conclude, and to put a long story short, **Ideas Matter**. And the Idea of a University matters above all. Please allow me to conclude therefore with a brief quotation from John Henry Cardinal Newman in his classical work *The Idea of a University*, which we always use in the presentations of our Institute for Political Studies of the Catholic University of Portugal:

“A University is a place where inquiry is pushed forward and discoveries verified and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous, and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge.”