Estoril Political Forum 2017
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The Weakening of the West?

Here in Estoril, the memory of Winston Churchill is always kept bright, thanks in no small part to my old friend and comrade in arms, Joao Carlos Espada. I hope that Professor Espada won't mind, therefore, if I contemplate our theme through a Churchillian prism. I want to ask the question: what would Churchill be advising us today?

Though he never even studied at a university, let alone wrote a work of political thought, Churchill had very definite ideas about the principles for which the West should stand. His biographer, the late Sir Martin Gilbert, distilled these ideas into a series of lectures at the British Academy in 1980, later published as *Churchill's Political Philosophy*. Gilbert summarised this "supremely simple" philosophy thus: "It was based on the preservation and protection of individual freedom and a decent way of life, if necessary by State aid and power; on the protection of the individual against the misuse of State power; on the pursuit of political compromise and the middle way, in order both to maintain and to improve the framework of Parliamentary democracy; on the protection of small States against the aggression of more powerful States; and on the linking together of all democratic States to protect themselves from the curse and calamity of war."

I propose to examine how well the West today is upholding these Churchillian principles. First, are we doing enough to protect individual freedom and prosperity, not only in our own countries, but across the globe? Second, how well are we preserving parliamentary democracy against its enemies, at home and abroad? Third, are we vigorous in defending small states and stateless minorities against the aggression of tyranny and ideology? Fourth, are we keeping our international organisations, especially the Atlantic alliance, in good repair, so that the free world may not only deter any possible attack but inspire hope among the hopeless? Finally, is the West weakening in its resolve to do these things? If so, why is this happening -- and what can be done about it?

The liberty of the individual has been and ought to be at the heart of Western civilisation from its Biblical and classical inception. "Ladies of the Empire, I stand for Liberty," declared Churchill in his very first public speech, given at the age of 19 while he was an officer cadet at Sandhurst. The "ladies of the Empire" were in fact prostitutes and young Winston was defending their freedom to solicit theatregoers in the lobby of the Empire Theatre, Leicester Square, against the Vigilante Societies, or "prudes on the prowl", as he called them. They had erected barricades outside the theatre, leading to a riot. The prudes wanted to close the Empire and "abolish sin by Act of Parliament", whereas Churchill and the "anti-prudes" refused to "sacrifice the liberty of the subject" and preferred "a less coercive and more moderate procedure", namely "educating the mind of the individual and improving the social conditions under which he lives". Unaware that his father Lord Randolph Churchill, who had first introduced him to the dramatic pleasures of the Empire, was already suffering from the syphilis that would kill him, Churchill observed that "Nature metes out great and terrible punishments to the 'roué and libertine' – far greater punishments than it is in the power of any

civilised State to award." He lost the battle for the Empire, but in the war between libertarian and authoritarian ideas, Churchill was almost always on the side of the individual against the state.

One rare exception came in the Second World War: as France fell and Britain feared invasion, Churchill authorised the detention of "enemy aliens" on the Isle of Man, many of whom were Jewish refugees from the Nazis. Churchill knew this perfectly well. In one of the less celebrated passages of his celebrated speech of June 4, 1940, he said: "I am very sorry for them, but we cannot, at the present time and under the present stress, draw all the distinctions which we should like to do." He was much criticised at the time in the Commons; it is a tribute to British parliamentary democracy that the great majority of detainees were released within a year. Yet though such emergency measures may be justifiable in wartime, it is hard to imagine the British enduring a state of emergency in response to terrorist attacks, however terrible, as the French have done since November 2015. The rights of the individual, freedom of speech and the rule of law must never, in a civilised society, be abrogated indefinitely merely for the convenience of the state. Extraordinary counter-terrorism measures are sometimes necessary for public safety, but they must be proportionate to the peril and always subject to judicial oversight. The Western democracies have usually got the balance between liberty and security about right, but the English-speaking peoples are still usually more vigilant than our Continental counterparts.

Protecting individual liberties on a global scale is, of course, much more difficult than doing so at home, but no less vital to our own long-term security. The migration crisis has reminded us that the lack of prosperity and liberty for hundreds of millions of individuals in Asia and Africa can have a direct impact on Europe and America. The West must promote the benefits of free markets regulated by impartial rules laid down by authorities accountable to the people. This is what the late Michael Novak called democratic capitalism, and it remains the greatest engine of growth the world has ever seen. By contrast, the crony capitalism of Russia, China and many other countries where democracy is either wholly lacking or deeply corrupt, enjoys far less legitimacy and is consequently more precarious. Equality before the law remains a precondition of prosperity, liberty and a civilised society. In Catholic moral theology, it is not only murder that cries out to heaven for justice, but the cry of oppressed peoples, slaves and exploited workers.

Individuals in the West insist that our governments acknowledge a duty to use their power and influence to relieve the suffering of those less fortunate than ourselves. This duty need not take the form of foreign aid, but it does require intervention in cases of genocide or other crimes against humanity. In the case of Syria, for example, the West was too slow to act. Democracies may not fight wars with one another, but they do hide behind one another in avoiding their humanitarian obligations. Many of them are fearful of leading, rather than following, public opinion -- disdainful or ignorant as they are of Edmund Burke's principle that members of parliament should represent voters rather than be their delegates. Representative democracy does not entail ignoring the electorate's wishes; but it does imply offering leadership, both intellectual and practical, to those for whom politics is at most a peripheral concern.

This brings me to the second question, that of preserving parliamentary democracy. The resurgence of populism in Europe and America may be seen as an established fact, but the

phenomenon eludes definition. Perhaps the best way of distinguishing between populist demagogues and more statesmanlike leaders is in their attitudes to parliamentary institutions. Emmanuel Macron's presidential triumph over Marine Le Pen's populism in France was followed by his less remarked upon -- but actually even more remarkable -- victory in elections to the National Assembly. The latter was hailed as the greatest "clear-out" of French parliamentarians since 1914, which was two republics and a dictatorship ago. But President Macron reportedly prefers to compare himself more modestly to General de Gaulle, whose founding of the Fifth Republic was intended to subordinate the legislature to the executive. If I were a Frenchman, I would be worried about a charismatic leader who, having won the presidency by a big margin, then filled the assembly with his creatures, all the while keeping France in a state of emergency. Not for nothing is the name of Napoleon often invoked in connection with Macron; but the relevant comparison is not with the first emperor of that name, but his nephew Louis Napoleon, who was just one year older than Macron when he was elected the first French President in 1848. Four years later, Louis Napoleon made himself emperor after a coup d'état. Bonapartism, as Marx dubbed the new ideology, worked on a highly successful formula: populism plus militarism equals legitimacy. Macron lacks the military prestige of Napoleon or De Gaulle, but he too presents himself as the saviour of the nation and of Europe. So Macronism is populism plus patriotism plus Europeanism. None of this has anything to do with parliamentary democracy and in fact could pose a threat to its survival in France, especially in the context of terrorist attack and the state of emergency, which amounts to an interruption in the rule of law.

I have dwelt on the case of France because it illustrates so vividly how mass panic in the face of populism can easily translate into a cure that is worse than the disease. Populism is not necessarily a threat to parliamentary democracy, but when allied with big government, external threat and a judiciary that is either supine or partial, the cult of the personality and the mass movement can overwhelm the procedures that normally circumscribe political power. The classic examples date from the 1920s and 1930s: Mussolini's Italy, Pilsudski's Poland, pre-Anschluss Austria, Franco's Spain, Salazar's Portugal and of course the Weimar Republic. But we also have contemporary cases: Erdogan's Turkey, Duerte's Philippines, Zuma's South Africa, and above all Putin's Russia. In case Europeans suppose themselves immune, let them consider how close Greece has come to a collapse of parliamentary democracy. As for the United States: while reports of the death of the American Republic have certainly been exaggerated, there is real cause for concern. The demons unleashed by Obama, who used executive and judicial power to thwart Congress at every opportunity, have reached their apotheosis under Trump, who seems to have little grasp of constitutional limitations and none at all of his own. The fact that Bernie Sanders came close to eclipsing Hillary Clinton illustrates how easily the far-Left may seize on conservative provocations in order to justify their own.

Then there is Jeremy Corbyn, the most successful figure of the extra-parliamentary Left in the West. His Leninist grassroots populism raised turnout among voters aged 18-25 from 43 per cent in 2015 to over 66 per cent in 2017. The effect of such a campaign in London and other university cities was devastating for the Conservatives, who had no idea what hit them because they hadn't any means of communicating with the twentysomethings. While the Tories relied on leaflets and emails, Labour was flooding social media and even deployed bots on dating apps such as Tinder. Behind the slick and adroit presentation of himself as an insurgent

"bad boy", though, Corbyn and his cadres remained the cold-blooded Marxists they have always been: only after the election did a photograph appear of the smiling Corbyn flanked by his two Wykehamist lieutenants of the extreme Left: James Schneider of the entryist youth organisation Momentum and Seumas Milne, the former Guardian guru who now masterminds Labour's agitprop. These people hate the West and we should be under no illusions about what would happen if they ever gained real power. Continentals may delude themselves that after Brexit and Trump, the "Anglo-Saxons" won't matter any more in the Western alliance and so they can contemplate such a putsch by the far-Left across the English Channel with equanimity. History suggests otherwise.

Churchill's third criterion requires us to defend the independence of smaller states against the depredations of their larger neighbours. Good examples of such interventions were the liberations of Kuwait from Saddam Hussein in 1991, of Bosnia and Kosovo from Milosevic in the 1990s, and of the territories in Iraq and Syria conquered by the Islamic State over the past three years. In the latter case, few Western forces were directly involved, with the result that this proxy civil war has dragged on for some seven years. After our recent failure to deter Russian aggression in Ukraine, the West has little to boast about in any case. It is true that deterrence still works on behalf of the weak against the strong. But Nato and the EU have failed to raise the price of Putin's attempts to extend his sphere of influence, while elsewhere the Chinese, Iranians and others have expanded with impunity. Meanwhile the explosion of human rights and international law, invoked by NGOs who mobilise the power of images, have constrained Western governments but often leave more authoritarian regimes largely unscrutinised.

In the Western media, and especially the social media, it is almost an article of faith that Americans and Europeans are both merciless and mercenary. In a phrase that has resonated ever since 1940, when Michael Foot denounced the authors of appeasement, we are the guilty men. It is allegedly we who, rather than protect the sovereignty of smaller states, invade, bomb or coerce them. The West is thus weakened, not only in its practical capabilities -- what we can do -- but in its moral authority -- who we are. We might call this phenomenon moral masochism. It is especially prevalent among the young and among their educators in schools and universities. There are treatments for moral masochism: reading and travelling widely, as opposed to the virtual literacy and mobility of the web, for example. But there is no cure. Many academics spend a lifetime teaching and writing as if the West were the source of all evil and very little else.

An example of moral masochism: in the latest issue of the leading journal *Commentaire*, the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut castigates the *Histoire mondiale de la France* (*The global history of France*), an ambitious collaborative work that was greeted with rapture by the French intellectual establishment. For Finkielkraut, by contrast, this "breviary of political correctness and submission" is a denial of French culture, a preemptive cringe towards Islamism that "replaces identity with indebtedness". The fraudulence of this pseudo-cosmopolitanism is revealed by the authors' failure to mention European immigrants who have enriched French culture, in favour of Muslim role models, such as the multiethnic French football team that won the World Cup in 1998. This "global history" ignores almost all of the greatest French writers, artists and composers; one of the few whom it does mention, Balzac, is chided for his cultural nationalism. It is impossible for immigrants to identify with a French

civilisation whose specificity is denied by an academic elite desperate to resolve the "crisis of living together". *"Quelle misere!"* Finkielkraut exclaims, as well he might.

What about the Atlantic alliance, which was Churchill's most important legacy. Are we likely to leave this precious bond to our posterity? As we speak, President Trump is making his commitment to Nato, in particular to its crucial Article Five which requires the alliance to come to the aid of any member under attack, conditional on all other states contributing a minimum of two per cent of GDP to defence. To grasp how damaging this shift in policy may prove to be, one might recall the motto of *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas: "All for one, one for all." Supposing D'Artagnan had said to Athos, Porthos and Aramis: "But I'm the youngest, cleverest and bravest of our brotherhood. I won't risk my life unless your duelling comes up to my standard." Does anyone think the famous pact would have lasted long?

But the fault is not only on the American side, nor is it exclusively Trump's doing. European leaders, especially on the Left, have exploited his unpopularity and latent anti-Americanism has resurfaced. Giving the EU a military dimension was always a bad idea; if such a European force were to operate independently of Nato, it could stretch the alliance's already inadequate deterrence capabilities to breaking point. Yet that is precisely what is being seriously proposed in Brussels, Paris and Berlin. Worse, Angela Merkel has been canvassing support for a bid to isolate Trump on the issue of climate change. Not only is this unlikely to succeed -- Canada's Justin Trudeau has already hedged his bets -- but even if a German-led coalition of the willing were to freeze out the Trump administration, what a pyrrhic victory that would be. Europe has always needed the United States far more than the other way round, as the history of the last century demonstrates. If two world wars and the Cold War were not enough to convince Europe that it is a danger to itself without a strong American presence, will the present dangers posed by Putin's Russia and Islamist terrorism suffice?

From all of the above, it should be clear that in this 21st century of ours there has been, along with an unprecedented growth in global prosperity and alleviation of poverty, both thanks to the spread of Western values, a weakening of the West's resolve to defend itself and those values. That weakening of resolve is not, it should be emphasised, occurring for the first time. It is true that we face adversaries using methods of a new and alarming kind. But that too has happened before. Why, then, are we seemingly incapable of learning from our own recent history? Let us return to Churchill. In May 1939, the House of Commons was debating Palestine. Churchill -- already vindicated in his denunciations of the policy of appeasement, which he saw as a betrayal of the Czechs, by the German occupation of Prague -- now turned his attention to the betrayal of the Jews, many of them fleeing the Nazi menace, who had settled in Palestine on the basis of the promise made by the British in the Balfour Declaration. In Churchill's eyes, that promise would be broken if the British caved in to Arab terrorism. "Never was the need for fidelity and firmness more urgent than now. You are not going to found and forge the fabric of a grand alliance to resist aggression, except by showing continued examples of your firmness in carrying out, even under difficulties, and in the teeth of difficulties, the obligations into which you have entered."

This typically uncompromising speech is especially quotable now, as we approach the centenary of the Balfour Declaration – that great act of statesmanship which stood for the best of the West. Today, as in the 1930s, we need to stand by our obligations, not only to the Jewish people, but to others threatened by aggression and intolerance. Our fidelity to our principles

will determine how soon the West will recover from its present weakened state. The survival of Western civilisation will depend on the strength of its intellectual fortifications: for example, on making the economic case for the free market and the strategic one for rebuilding the military forces of the Atlantic alliance. But it is not good enough to rely on the great thinkers of the past: we must build on their foundations, but with a bold new architecture that can inspire the young to emulate the aspirations of our ancestors. This is a gargantuan and thankless task -- as I know to my cost, having devoted the last decade of my life to it. Even Churchill succumbed to depression, his "black dog", on occasion, as when he wrote to Beaverbrook in 1928: "Unteachable from infancy to tomb – there is the first and main characteristic of mankind." A gathering such as this one in Estoril, however, restores my faith in the future of humanity. Nowhere could one find a more appreciative audience: mainly young, eager to learn, and open to this message. It is a message, despite all our adversities, above all of hope. Into your hands, my friends, I commend the defence of Western civilisation!
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