

Tolerance, Freedom and Respect
Speech by Rt Hon Hazel Blears MP
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

High Commissioner, Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen – it is an honour for me to be here addressing you in South Africa today.

As a nation you are more aware than most of the importance of democracy and the opportunity for individuals and local communities to have a voice. It was Nelson Mandela that said ‘For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others’. The challenge we face today, not as Britons or South Africans but as citizens of the world is to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to live in a society which is inclusive, transparent, and accountable to its citizens.

It was South Africa that taught the rest of the world the importance of reconciliation. It was also South Africa that showed the rest of the world how enemies could find a way to move past the hatred and distrust to forgiveness and plot a path to the future together, a

path of hope. The painful lessons of your Truth and Reconciliation Committees are lessons that we can all learn from.

A successful state can not be measured in purely empirical terms such as GDP or routine elections, our analysis must go further than that – to the very core of society. We as global citizens must encourage a free press, the right to organize Labour Movements that are free of coercion, the right to create community organizations, community ownership and a vibrant and representative civil society.

No one country, no one democracy has all the solutions to the problems we are facing today. We are the sum of our parts. We **must** learn from one another. The world is facing challenges that 20 years ago would have been un-imaginable. The problems of mass migration, the proliferation of terrorism, the globalisation of the economy and climate change will provide great challenges and it is **vital** that we work together across the world to ensure that we tackle these issues and make the 21st century a century of progress, of inclusion for all the citizens of the globe.

This afternoon, I will outline how we must look to refresh and nurture our democracy. I will examine 4 essential components of democracy and I will argue that no one country has the monopoly on the answers to the problems that are facing us. We **must** search for best practice across the world and look to learn lessons from all members of the global community. The challenge that we face is not an easy one. We must reach across cultural divides and ensure engagement for all communities. We must ensure that the Muslim faith and British citizenship are not seen as mutually exclusive but are in fact self-reinforcing and that our values unite us.

Democracy is neither the exclusive preserve, nor value of the western world . Democracy comes from within, and the shape it takes will depend on the circumstances and traditions of the country concerned. This is clear from the variety of arrangements in democracies around the world today - including in Europe, where despite our common values there are remarkable differences between nations' own democratic institutions. In supporting change, we must respond to the needs and aspirations of governments and peoples wherever they may be. Especially in fragile and post-conflict states, international actors need to be

sensitive to local conditions when promoting democracy in order to ensure the widest local ownership of the reform process.

Democracy can not be seen as **just** the act of placing a vote in the ballot box, essential though that is. Elections alone do not equal democracy. Although this is a powerful image, it is just part of an over arching goal to fully involve people in their communities and their states, for citizens to have an ongoing debate with government, and to have ownership of local and national projects.

The route of the word Democracy comes from the Greek word Demos, which means 'people' and as we face the new challenges in the world we must look to the 'people' to help in providing ideas and solutions to the problems that are facing us at the dawn of the 21st century .

I have been ? in my discussions this week with the real effort made here in South Africa to ensure your government stays in touch with the people.

I will now outline 4 components that I believe are essential to the growth of democracy in the modern world. We must broaden our definition of democracy to include different concepts and ideals.

This will help to ensure that we are equipped to face the challenges to come.

1. Free Press

The Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations Louise Fréchette stated “Unless ideas and information could travel freely, both within frontiers and across them, peace would remain that much more elusive. Where censorship was imposed, both democracy and development were the losers. A free and independent press was the lifeblood of strong, functioning societies, and a lifeline to progress itself.” The power of these words **cannot** be underestimated. Charting the progress of any nation it is clear to see that a strong, independent voice is essential for the stable foundation of democracy. In Britain the press have been ever present to monitor government. Its raison d’être has been to criticise and **sometimes** to cheer, in response to governments’ conduct, policy discussions and policy implementation. With this great power comes great responsibility. The media must realise its privileged position and act accordingly. The Media should be a tool to fight corruption, dictatorships and poor governance across the globe. Here in South Africa the press

played an important part in the fight against apartheid and is now protected by a freedom of expression clause in the constitution.

2. Trade Unions

The British Labour Party was set up in 1900 to fight for representation for the Labour movement - both trade unions and socialist societies - in Parliament. Its first leader was James Kier Hardie, one of the earliest Labour MPs. Since then my party has worked with our affiliated Trade Union partners to improve the conditions of working people across Britain and beyond. For any state to succeed there must be an independent voice for working people. Here in South Africa COSATU has played an essential role. COSATU was launched in December 1985 with its member unions opposed to apartheid and committed to a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa. Trade Unions can and must play an integral role in the growth of democracy around the world. These organizations provide a voice to the voiceless, training and leadership skills and provide a tangible result – better living standards for all.A key to any democracy.

3. Active Communities

Martin Luther King once stated "At the heart of all that civilization has meant and developed is 'community' – the mutually cooperative and voluntary venture of man to assume a semblance of responsibility for his brother." The spirit of community can not be underestimated. In my home town of Salford which I am honoured to represent in Westminster, I have witnessed the power of community first hand. We have transformed Salford from a town decimated by the collapse of traditional industry to a city that is vibrant, outward looking and soon to become the new northern home of the BBC. In the 1980s we had 50% unemployment in some of the wards; the streets were dangerous to walk. Neighbours ignored neighbours. People turned their backs on community as they thought they could achieve more alone than they could together. But it is through community engagement and community participation that the face of Salford has been completely changed. Where once we had derelict houses and crime, we now have affordable housing schemes and jobs.

Working closely with Muslim communities in the UK and involving them in driving change and improving opportunities, will help us tackle the alienation that can cause extremism. Here in South Africa, you have witnessed the awesome power of community. Where once there was apartheid and human rights abuses there is now integration and hope. Where once there was mass poverty and joblessness, there is employment and investment. South Africa is now a leading light not just for Africa but for the rest of the world. As a new democracy you can be a model in many ways, in particular as a successful multi cultural society. We must learn from each other, we must encourage practical engagement in all of our communities – for without understanding each other, we can not hope to achieve everything we want to.

4. Civil Society

Democracy cannot just mean government, we must broaden our definition to include a free media, trade unions and community but we must also look to the role of civil society. And by civil society I do not mean an academic definition but local people getting involved in local or national issues. Groups that foster a desire for participation and involvement are the life blood of any democracy. These groups promote debate and discussion amongst society

and influence government policy. As we move forward into the 21st century and beyond, the role of these groups in supporting democratic aspirations will be fundamental to their success.

We must ensure that **everyone**, men and women, people from every background, have the chance to take part, to become magistrates, to help to run schools, to manage their own housing and to become councillors and play an important role in shaping the future.

Elections are not held in isolation from a state's culture, religion and history. Democracy did not just happen in Europe or elsewhere in the world. We must recognise the importance of such factors and ensure that they are respected and honoured. We look at a limited definition of democracy at our peril. Broadening our idea of democracy will ensure greater engagement for the future.

The case for democracy is practical as well as moral. Democracies do not fight each other. And people who have a say and a stake in their own futures are less likely to turn to extremes, to hatred and to violence.

The terrorist attacks in Nairobi, New York, Madrid, Bali, London and other countries throughout the world have brought home to all of us how important it is for us both to confront the ideology that threatens us but also to combat alienation, democratic disenfranchisement and economic deprivation. This determination was demonstrated by the engagement of the British government with Muslim communities following the terrorist attacks in London on 7 July 2005. For their part, Muslim Communities in the UK are working hard with the British government to prevent extremism and demonstrate the compatibility between Islam and democracy. A compatibility that is shown by the experience of countries as disparate as Turkey and Indonesia, where there is an emerging strength in mainstream Islam that should greatly encourage us.

I wish to pay tribute to the role of Premier Rasool whose leadership, not just here in the western cape, but whose global foresight in promoting dialogue between faith communities, throughout the world, in tackling issues of conflict resolution and the promoting of social cohesion has been of such significance.

Recently, people have pointed the finger at British foreign policy as the cause of terrorist attacks. I acknowledge that British foreign

policy has frequently been controversial. We do not shirk from this debate and indeed, we welcome it. This is the true hallmark for a democracy. However, terrorism existed before the Iraq war; before the removal of the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. It is patently absurd to say that British foreign policy **causes** terrorism – the correct reaction to disapproval of a policy is not by killing innocent civilians, but by engaging **in** the democratic process to achieve change. The solution to this conflict lies in dialogue, engagement and the broadening of civil society.

Domestic Engagement

Following the July 7 attacks in London, seven working groups were set up to develop proposals to tackle violent extremism. The groups focused on young people, tackling radicalisation, supporting local action, engaging women, imam training, education and security, Islamaphobia and confidence in the police.

The groups recommended encouraging further debate between young British Muslims and influential international scholars to facilitate a stronger challenge to the extremist rhetoric. The FCO is working with a group of Muslim organisations to assist the running of an International Roadshow of Islamic Scholars which brings

Islamic scholars to the UK to expose young Muslims to alternative international Islamic schools of thought. More than 40,000 young Muslims have taken part in Roadshows throughout the country. The programme aims to reach more than 100,000 by the end of the year.

I have taken part in a series of outreach visits to predominantly Muslim communities and listened to the comments of the people living in those communities. Many of the conversations were difficult but it is vital for the government to listen to people at local level who often hold different views and opinions. The government is determined not just to listen to the same voices all the time but to reach out beyond those who have traditionally had access to government.

The Prime Minister recently hosted a meeting with 40 Muslim mothers and grandmothers from across the UK to discuss the issues affecting their families and communities. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss how the government can better engage on grassroots issues, especially with Muslim women, in modern society. I believe that Muslim women should, and will, play an increasingly important role in their communities.

At the end of this month a report will be published that will outline a strategy for increasing engagement with Muslim women across the country. This type of engagement is the the key to further improving understanding with Muslim communities. This engagement must be across all levels of Muslim communities, not just those at the senior level on policy but also with local community leaders on grassroots issues.

However, it is not just government that can bring about engagement with the Muslim faith. Muslim communities too, have a responsibility to engage with government and to tackle extremism.

We also need to highlight the very real achievement of people in the community and to encourage good role models.

The British Muslim News Awards for Excellence are in their sixth year. They are designed to celebrate the achievements of both Muslims and non Muslims in British Society. They have highlighted a wealth of talent, ability and achievement in Britain and beyond.

This year, 2006 Professor Saghir Akhtar won the award for

excellence in engineering, science and technology. He is an internationally renowned academic in drug delivery of genome-based therapeutics and currently Chair of Drug Delivery and Director of the Centre for Genome Based Therapeutics at Cardiff University.

Sport is another key area of engagement. It is not often one can cheer about English sport but if one looks at our cricket team, there is a new sense of optimism buoyed by our new rising stars. SAJID MAHMOOD led England to victory over Pakistan in the recent test. He is the son of Pakistani Immigrants and has become a vital part of the team. He can be a role model for future generations to demonstrate that being Muslim and British are not mutually exclusive but self re-enforcing

MONTY PANESAR, another rising star was born to Punjabi parents; he is the first Sikh to represent England in cricket. It is vital that we show all aspects of life are open to everyone seeking to participate. No country has a monopoly on ideas and solutions to the issues of engagement. Working in close cooperation is the only way for us to progress as a global society.

Engaging in an International Arena

We are working hard on the global front to cement ties with the Muslim world. Reaching across borders and boundaries to learn from one another, to understand each others culture, history and religion. People fear what they do not know. From ignorance springs hatred. Unless we are willing to break down barriers and learn from one another then we are doomed to fail. If we as politicians and policy makers do not engage with the biggest audience possible while embracing new formats and new ways of talking, and listening, then we will find it extremely difficult to change people's attitudes. And I am keen to draw on the South African experience of dialogue as a means to resolving internal conflict.

The extent of the British government's involvement with the Muslim world is often understated, so it does no harm sometimes to list the areas in which we have been actively involved.

Over the past five years the British Government has provided well over £5 billion in development aid to much of the Muslim world. Alongside the EU and the US, Britain is one of the largest humanitarian donors to the Palestinian people.

We are the second largest bi-lateral donor of humanitarian assistance to the millions caught up in the Darfur crisis. Resolving the tragic tangle of deadly conflicts in Sudan, where Muslims are pitted against Muslims, and so many innocent people have lost their lives, remains a key objective for us.

The Government gave more than £128 million to support the relief effort in Pakistan following the earthquake. And we backed up with substantial additional funding the huge generosity of the British public in the aftermath of the Asian tsunami which struck Indonesia, in particular, so harshly.

The UK has provided over £20 million since 2003 to help the rebuilding and reconstruction of Bosnia. And it is important to remember that it was NATO intervention in Kosovo, a predominantly Muslim country, which averted a humanitarian catastrophe not seen in Europe since the Second World War.

There is no greater evidence of our commitment to partnership with the Muslim world than the EU agreement, reached under Britain's Presidency last year, to open accession negotiations with

Turkey. We remain fully committed to Turkey's membership of the EU which will show conclusively that the Muslim and non-Muslim world is united in a shared respect for justice, tolerance and individual rights.

A key part of the British government's engagement agenda is challenging the misconceptions about life as a British Muslim, by showing that Muslims in the UK enjoy the same rights and legal protection from abuses that all other citizens do. The MCB has recently said that Britain is one of the best places for Muslims to practise their faith and encourage people to get involved in civil life. The FCO has helped organise visits by delegations of British Muslims to seventeen countries. Delegations include people from a wide range of life, including newspaper and magazine editors, policemen, politicians and scholars. The delegates are not government spokespeople. Indeed many of them have very strong feelings against some of the UK's foreign policies, particularly in the Muslim world. But the fact that they can disagree with government policy and still be involved in a government-backed initiative highlights the fundamental right of freedom of expression enjoyed by all British citizens.

Conclusion

This afternoon I have outlined a positive way forward for us as global citizens. I have argued that we must develop and strengthen our democracy. It is through engagement and understanding that we can tackle the problems of extremism and terrorism. If people are given a stake in their communities, a say in the way that community moves forward, they are less likely to turn to the path of violence and extremism. Through sport and cultural engagement- we can show people that society is open to all those who are willing to participate. Britain, much like South Africa, is the sum of all its people. Using all the talents and skills that people have to offer will provide a gateway to the future.

To ensure success, we must look to broaden our definition of democracy to include issues such as free media, civil society, NGOs and local groups which will foster a greater sense of engagement and interaction. We must battle for global inclusion. For if one of us is left behind, that is one too many, I came into politics to fight for social justice, inclusion and to value everyone whatever their race, faith or background. I stand here as determined as ever to ensure that that happens. I am committed to giving **everyone** a stake in society, to providing an environment

where our young people can challenge their elected representatives in an open and transparent system, where access to government and those in authority is not an aspiration but a regular occurrence, where all voices can be heard and difficult debates can happen.

Engagement with Muslim communities is a challenge not just to me or government but to society as a whole. This can not be a top down process. All of us must reach across cultural divides to create understanding. In the UK we have sought to strengthen Muslim communities; communities which have contributed greatly to the wealth, culture and vibrancy of our society; communities made up in the overwhelming majority by decent, law-abiding and hard working individuals, to enable them to tackle extremism and promote the true vision of Islamic culture and religion: a faith based on peace, not violence, a faith that promotes tolerance, freedom and respect, values we all seek to live by.

I am acutely conscious as I make this speech of events in the Lebanon, Palestine and Israel where those values find themselves challenged and where the sense of uncertainty and fearfulness that has been engendered has reverberated well beyond that

region. These events have made the search for peace and justice in our world all the more urgent. Our commitment to a two state solution and to stability and security for all the people of the region within internationally recognised and respected boundaries is clear. The UN Resolution must be given it's chance to contribute to progress, it is of course only a beginning there will be much for us all to do. In the meantime, we must all re-double our efforts to promote a wider dialogue.

The PM said in his recent speech, unless we reappraise our strategy, unless we revitalise the broader global agenda on poverty, climate change, trade, and in respect of the Middle East, bend every sinew of our will to making peace between Israel and Palestine, we will not win. And this is a battle we must win.

Zaki Badawi, one of the most revered Islamic scholars of his time, expressed optimism that, as he put it: 'our society will march forward in unity with confidence that we shall overcome the threats to our peaceful life and live in harmony'. I'm sure he spoke for all of us – we have to re-double our efforts to ensure that we can live in harmony.

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Thank you for giving me the privilege of speaking to you today – this is my first visit to South Africa and I have experienced for myself the warmth and grace of your people and the insight and energy that you have brought to creating and sustaining your democracy.

It has been an inspiration for me and will certainly inform my thinking for the future.

Thank you.