

These Values Separate Democrats from Dictators and Terrorists

This year Shami Chakrabarti became the first Director of Liberty to be invited to address the annual conference of the Conservative Party. Liberty, as a cross party and non-party organisation, was pleased to accept the invitation and to participate in the conference debate on the 2nd October. It provided a unique opportunity to explain Liberty's view that human rights values should underpin the thinking and policy development of all political parties.

Ladies and gentleman. Like most people in Britain, I'm not a member of this or any political party, so I'm especially grateful for this opportunity to contribute to your discussion today.

Liberty (The National Council for Civil Liberties) is a cross- party, non-party organisation, and by the generosity of your invitation to its Director, I hope that you can send a signal and make a commitment that fundamental rights and freedoms should not be the preserve of any one party, still less any Government. In a democracy at least, they belong to all the people.

Governments do not own our liberties and yet they sacrifice them so readily on the high altar of ambition with constant tough talk and tougher legislation drafted on the back of a press release- the pit bull posturing of Home Secretaries who would be King. Neither tough on crime nor its causes, but weak in both practical reality and defence of the rule of law.

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Aren't we a little tired of the cynical slogans? Must we really choose between our freedom and our security? Between decent treatment of victims and suspects? Must we really hand a blank cheque to this and future Governments to snoop without warrant and punish without trial? To replace evidence, judge and jury with the swift and secret suspicions of the Special Commissioner?

I say no.....What do you say?

I say- why should a young person in trouble respect the local magistrate if politicians, Prime Ministers constantly denigrate our legal system, judges and the rule of law?

Please beware the political caricature of two hermetically sealed categories of humanity in this country. On the one hand "decent hard-working families". No parking tickets or wicked thoughts. Brushed hair and clean noses - kids off to cello practice. No rows or strains or mental-health issues of any kind. Not so much Britain as Stepford.

Next door- the neighbours from hell- the unworthy- the irredeemable. Substance abuse and abusive behaviour. Not a decent bone in their bodies. Not so much Britain as Asboland.

If we were honest with ourselves and each other, we know that reality is more complex than that. Young men in particular can be both victim and perpetrator, rightly and wrongly suspected, not in one life-time but a lunch-time. The solutions

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must be more complex than constant new legislative gimmicks which sweep up the innocent with the guilty and set them all up to fail.

Beware also, the “war on terror”- the permanent state of emergency that becomes extraordinary excuse for summary extradition and extraordinary rendition, everything from the folly of identity cards to the horror of internment and torture. The “war on terror” that allows terrorists and murderers to call themselves soldiers and recruit in corresponding numbers. The war that goes on not for 90 days but 90 years.

I will not be labelled soft on terror for standing up for the values that make this country great. I do not trivialise the gravity of the threats facing my generation of democrats at this moment in our history. I’m just not arrogant enough to sweep the lessons of our shared history aside.

Sexual intercourse might have begun in 1963, but Human rights were not invented in 1998. There is no reason to be spooked by the word “European” in the Convention that Winston Churchill promoted after the holocaust and the Second World War. Free speech and fair trials were born in this country and rightly shared with the Continent, the Commonwealth and wider world.

These values separate democrats from dictators and terrorists. They are the essence of the Britishness that can bind people of all parties, faiths and none together. There is no law and order, no inspiration for civilised society without them.

Thanks for listening.

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ENDS

Shami Chakrabarti, Director, Liberty (The National Council for Civil Liberties)

Conservative Party Conference Speech.

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