



Presidential speech
President of Liberal International
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Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

Last July, for the second Isaiah Berlin lecture, I tried to answer the following question: do we, liberals, offer a unique, irreplaceable and therefore indispensable approach to present day world affairs, or do we have nothing better to offer than diluted environmentalism, toned down social-democracy, watered down conservatism, or some revisited third way approach?

As you may guess, my answer on the question was positive. Yes, liberalism offers a unique, indispensable and irreplaceable approach to world affairs because it is rooted in trust (qualified by prudence, as Gladstone aptly put it), because it entrusts people with the right and the plight to shape their own lives and communities, because it considers that individual freedom and individual initiative are the indispensable tools of development. I also stressed that this approach is universally valid, if not universally accepted.

And then came September 11th.

Between 9 and 10 o' clock in the morning, a first Boeing 747, full of passengers, crashed into one of the towers of the New York World Trade Centre, and a few minutes later a second Boeing 747, also full of passengers, crashed into the other Tower. Then we watched, in absolute horror, how both the Towers collapsed, engulfing thousands and thousands under the rubble, and we learned and saw that a third plane had crashed into the Pentagon, and that a fourth had slammed into the ground, again causing the death of hundreds.

In the following days we learned that these had been terrorist acts, carefully prepared for many months, if not years, masterminded in all probability, by a terrorist network, led by Osama Ben Laden, who was entrenched in war torn Afghanistan and who was determined to destroy the West, all it stands for and all he hated. In those hours and days, we all felt American, sharing the sorrow, the stupor and the fury over these wilful acts of destruction aimed at killing as many innocent civilians as possible at a few single strikes.

The September 11 attacks were not only attacks against buildings known the world over and against those working in them, they were attacks against the universality of precisely those values we hold dearest: the respect for human life and for human freedom.

They were also attacks against the United States and what the United States stand for. Soon an international, almost world-wide coalition against international terrorism was built, Afghanistan was attacked and invaded, the Al Quaeda network and the Taliban regime that had sheltered it were all but destroyed and Afghanistan and the Afghan people may now start to rebuilding some kind of life. That does not mean however, that we can return to our usual business, as if the matter had been definitely settled, or worse, as if nothing had happened. The September 11 attacks and their aftermath have raised too many difficult and unsettling questions, which need to be addressed.

Lest misunderstandings should arise, I want to make it absolutely clear that nothing ever can justify these terrorist acts. No richness, no arrogance, no callousness, no complacency justifies or validates the evil destruction wrecked upon New York and the New-Yorkers. Nor can some sort of perverted idealism be invoked on behalf of the terrorists. No ideal whatsoever can excuse what they did. Their self-sacrifice does not sanctify their evil deeds. We may commiserate with the isolation and the alienation from humanity in which they wilfully killed themselves, while killing thousands of others, but again, this cannot serve as an excuse.

Nor should we let ourselves be lulled by the cowardly illusion that the attacks were solely aimed against the United States, and that all non-Americans are safe. This delusion must be discarded for several reasons. Firstly because it is only one inch away from implying that the United States have somehow brought this upon themselves, or worse even, that they somehow deserve what happened. No people deserve this horror, this suffering. However much we may disagree with American policies, and I for one disagree to quite a degree, we should not, and I cannot condone a tit for tat rationale.

Secondly, we must shed the illusion that terrorism is somehow rational, and that it could be assuaged by rational arguments. I do not believe that this is the case. In Northern Ireland, in the Basque country, we watch terrorists who continue wreaking havoc in spite of repeated election outcomes clearly indicating that the people they pretend to vindicate do not want what they pretend to offer them. I do not believe that terrorism can be rationally addressed and defeated.

What I do believe is that we must address all situations that are breeding grounds for terrorism. All zones of so-called frozen conflicts, zones torn by interminable violent conflicts, urban slums are such breeding grounds. Every unresolved conflict may breed terrorism. Poverty, humiliation, and certainly hopelessness may breed terrorism.

In order to transform these situations into breeding ground for terrorism, however, a trigger, ferment is needed. Such trigger, such ferment will be found in ultra-radical, fanatic ideologies, closed upon themselves, pretending to have all answers to all questions, rejecting everything outside themselves and promising eternal and ultimate salvation and bliss. Such ideologies may be religiously inspired, but they need not be. The Rote Armee Fraktion, the ETA, the IRA, the Brigattisti Rossi were and are not religiously inspired but have committed awful terrorist acts and some of them still do.

I stress this because I am approaching one of the most disturbing questions raised by September 11: our relation to Islam. Until now, no sensible politician has embraced the view that we are facing a clash of civilisations or worse, a war of religions, but questions are being asked. Like: is Islam compatible with modernism; is it possible to successfully integrate Moslems in our own societies? Some politicians, in my own country, in France, in the Netherlands, in Germany and elsewhere, answer the question with a resolute no, pointing to the now empty skyline of Wall Street. I believe that they are mistaken, but I also believe that some brands of Islam, if I may call them so, have yet to come to terms with modern society. I also believe that if they fail to do so in a near future, they might fall prey to the kind of terrorism that has struck the Unites States.

For better and worse, our governments have embraced the fight against international terrorism and rightly so, but that fight is not without its own risks. For the sake of security, some of our freedoms and rights may be curtailed: the freedom of movement and travel, the protection of privacy, the right to judicial protection, the age old habeas corpus, national sovereignty, to name but a few.

The European Union has until now struck the right balance between security concerns and the protection of our values, but we will need to continue showing the same resolve when confronted with increasing American demands to impose their security norms on us.

The relationship between the United States and the rest of the world has also significantly shifted, raising awkward questions and concerns, which again urgently need to be addressed. The United States feel under siege as never before. We need to understand that, never before, the United States have been struck from outside on their own territory: the traumatism is deep, unprecedented and unquestionably unsettling. We should not brush it away as insignificant or childish. It is neither. But that does not mean that we should follow the Bush administration into its follies. Nobody had expected the US to advance as rapidly as it did in Afghanistan: most of us had feared that they would fare as the Soviet Union had. They did not; they all but wiped out the Taliban in no time. Their military might is unrivalled; they truly are the only military superpower in the world. That does not mean, however, that from now on, they can do as they please. Nor does it mean that, from now on, might is right. It is not. We must however recognize that right without the back-up of some measure of might, lacks both the necessary power and credibility to positively influence events.

We are fully justified to worry about the consequences of eventual unilateral US-undertakings, and to make those worries known without being accused of chickening out, as some American columnists have lately implied. The "if you are not with us, you are against us" stance is much too simplistic to suit the complexities of the world. The world has indeed become much more complicated, complex and dangerous since September 11 or should I say that the tragic attacks have awakened us to a reality that had been there all along, but that we had chosen not to see? I am afraid the latter is true. In the good old Cold War days, the great divide was the one between capitalism and communism. When communism collapsed everywhere but in Cuba, Vietnam, Laos, China and North Korea and when Vietnam and China embarked upon significant economic reforms aimed at introducing market elements in their economies, Fukuyama proclaimed that history had come to an end: capitalism had won.

That may be the case, but that has not ended that other great divide which we have largely ignored since the Berlin Wall came down: the divide between rich and poor countries, between the well-off people and the destitute persons. This divide, and the resulting inequity fuels to a large extent the protests against globalisation. Many of those protests are explicitly directed not only against globalisation, but also against neo-liberalism, which stands accused of having brought about all the woes associated with globalisation. Need I stress that neo-liberalism stands just one inch away from liberalism?

The reactions to the September attacks, that is the overall priority given to security concerns, to the repression of proven and suspected terrorist activities and sympathies, the possible curtailing of some of the freedoms and rights, the apparent willingness of the only remaining military superpower to go it alone, combined with the growing protests against globalisation, may make the world more dangerous and may endanger the world as we know and love it.

Even if this fear is exaggerated, even if I will be proven wrong, as I hope I will, it remains an undeniable fact that the essence of liberalism has come under strong pressure. Liberalism, I said, is rooted in trust, qualified by prudence. Liberalism entrusts people with the right and the plight to shape their own lives and communities, because it considers that individual freedom and individual initiative are the indispensable tools of development.

Terrorism undermines trust, terrorism breeds suspicion, fear and hatred. Terrorism must be fought, but we must not allow suspicion, fear and hatred to displace trust. To allow that to happen is to let terrorism win. Terrorism also fuels isolationism, of persons, communities and nations. Isolation leads to alienation and to hostility to the outside world. Isolation cripples people, communities and nations. We must not allow that to happen either. Terrorism poses the severest of threats to all liberalism stands for. So may the answers to terrorism, if they in turn reinforce suspicion, fear and isolation.

So we must come up with the right answers, and they must be political answers, rather than military ones.

Faced with a superpower tempted to believe that might is right, and tempted to act accordingly, we must relentlessly stress that military might alone will not make the world a safer place, quite the contrary.

The last thing a world torn by the great divide between rich and poor, needs, is a new armsrace, a competition of military build-up.

If trust is to progress the world over, the gap between the rich and the poor nations of the world must be bridged, and urgently so. To achieve that, development aid will not suffice. Even if the nations gathered in Monterrey agree to substantially increase such aid, and that remains in doubt, it will not suffice. What is needed, is to allow the poorer nations of the world to participate more fully in the world economy and in world trade. The worst that can befall a nation and a people is to be excluded from both. The prospects looked good at the end of the ministerial conference of the WTO in Doha where an ambitious development agenda was approved, but the most recent decisions taken in Washington may dash that hope, if they are to be followed by more of the same.

Even if that is not the case, we must remember that economic and commercial activities need a stable and predictable political environment to thrive. That is where political sustainability and good governance come in.

Political sustainability is an interesting notion, which I have borrowed from Andras Berzins, Latvia's Prime Minister. (One day I asked why he was so keen not only on EU-membership, but also on Nato-membership, and he answered me that he wanted to insure the political sustainability of his country, asking me further if I had any idea for how long Latvia had known political independence in the last hundred years. The answer is a dismal 13 years, if my memory serves me right).

By political sustainability, I mean a set of political institutions whose survival does not depend on one single person, family or political organisation. Such political and I should add judicial institutions, must be securely anchored in a body of law that stands above all else, and which is observed by everybody, not the least by the political leadership. Now we all know that most of the worlds' nations are equipped with the tokens of political sustainability. Democratic tokenism is widespread, but real democracy is something entirely different.

For a real democracy to develop, one in which individuals really enjoy the right to shape their own lives and to contribute to the general wellbeing, political development is indispensable.

I find it strange that so little energy goes into the promotion of political development in order to ensure political sustainability. Much more energy is spent for instance on the sustainability of development.

And I ask: is development possible, let alone sustainable, without a minimum of political sustainability. I do not think so. Now I know that many people, especially young people, consider politics to be dirty business. Many find it more rewarding to work on climate change, on civil society, in non-governmental organisations than to help build and organise political parties. NGO's are all right, political parties are not. My next question is whether political development is possible without political organisations; I call them parties, which channel the political activities and the political debate from one election to the next?

Again I do not think so. One can think of political vehicles to bring a given set of persons to power, or to keep them in power, but they are unlikely to ensure the kind of political sustainability on which liberal democracies rest. Need I stress that a liberal democracy is not necessarily led by liberals? By liberal democracy I mean the kind of politically sustainable environment that allows people to shape their own lives and communities, and to contribute to the general wellbeing. That by the way is also the kind of environment that stimulates economic and commercial activities. Liberals as a rule do serve the ideal of liberal democracy, but they do not have a monopoly on liberal democracy.

The elder among us know that Liberal International started, in the aftermath of the second Worldwar as a gathering of liberal minded individuals. Political parties, even liberal political parties, were not really welcome. Things changed gradually, very gradually, but they did change. Today, we still value liberal minded individuals, but we want political parties as members, liberal political parties. We have been rather successful: today, more than 80 liberal political parties, from more than 70 countries, are members of LI. In some fifteen percent of all countries, liberal parties are in government. We could do better, I know. We also could have fared much worse. Political liberalism today is a force to be reckoned with. For the last decade, liberalism has waxed. As it is now under threat, we must not let it wane.

To prevent that, I want LI and all of you to do two things. First, to strengthen liberal political parties, and second to strengthen liberal democracy.

In order to achieve the first, we must co-operate more closely and intensely. To achieve the second, we must co-operate with the other political internationals and with those organisations the world over (they are not many) that dedicate themselves



to the cause of building and strengthening political sustainability, better to serve the cause of liberal democracy.

After September 11, the world can use a renewed, invigorated liberalism, wiser from the lessons learned, but still rooted in our fundamental trust in humankind.

I thank you for your kind attention.

Annemie Neyts-Uyttebroeck

President of Liberal International