

MAKING DEMOCRACY REAL: THE PART OF THE INDIVIDUAL.

Thank you for inviting me to take part in the Public Lecture series of the Centre for Muslim States and Societies. The research work that your centre conducts on the beliefs and practices of Islamic states in the Indian Ocean region as well as your research on Muslim identities in Australia is a vital contribution to building bridges of understanding at this critical point in history. It is indeed a special honour and privilege to be speaking here on the subject” Making democracy real: the part of the individual.

Before I address the subject of the talk, I would like to tell you a bit more about myself. Who I am and my life journey so far is the lens through which I see the world and it might help you understand why I view the world as I do. It also colours my thoughts on the question of democracy and why I feel each individual has a part to play in making democracy a reality in all our countries.

I am an Egyptian professional woman who was born in Spain, went to school in Egypt and then in Australia where my father was Egyptian Ambassador. I did my medical training at Sydney University then specialised in paediatric emergency Medicine. For the last 30 years my home has been Liverpool – city of the Beatles and football – where I work in the largest and busiest children’s emergency department in Western Europe.

When I was a teenager in Australia I was confronted with many stereotypes. The western media portrayal of the Arab, Muslim world and especially women did not match my extended family and friends – many of whom were professional women doctors, dentists, architects and university lecturers. I thought then that faith had a marginal place in the modern world: that to be a productive member of society I had to embrace western scientific thinking and knowledge and that democracy and good governance should be left to the politicians.

At the age of 15 I was invited to a youth camp where I met the ideas of Initiatives of Change. I was struck by the quality of the people I met who combined a real interest in the world with a deep personal care for people. They also combined big thinking with practical application of change in their communities and workplace. I wanted to know more about their approach.

Initiatives of Change is a worldwide movement of people of diverse cultures and backgrounds, who are committed to transformation of society through change in human motives and behaviour starting with yourself. Personal transformation starts by an honest look at one’s own motives and behaviour, applying moral standards we wish to see in our society in our own personal life and seeking inner wisdom to guide our steps.

Being a true scientist I decided to embark on this experiment and try it for myself. As I reflected in quiet on my own life I was surprised by the thought that I was dishonest. I got angry about corruption and dishonesty in the Middle East and wider world, yet I took change from my father’s dressing table without asking his permission.

I realised that if I wanted a world free of corruption and dishonesty then I needed to apply this to my own life first. I was honest with my father and found a real freedom as a result of this simple step. So I continued with this experiment to reflect and deal with the integrity gap in my own life, as I genuinely wanted to make a difference to the world around me.

As I continued on this adventure I started to read and learn more about my own faith as a Muslim -going deeper to discover the philosophy as well as the practises of my faith. The Koran says "God does not change the state of a nation until the people themselves change". Another important aspect of faith related to personal conduct and conduct towards others; God made us all different nations and tribes "that you may get to know one another: that the noblest amongst you is he who is best in conduct".

As a result of this rediscovery of the importance of daily practise of quiet reflection as well as my own faith I felt I had two vocations or callings. One was to children and their health through my medical work as a paediatrician. The other calling was to build bridges of understanding between people of different cultures, backgrounds and religions. It is this second calling to be a "trust builder" that has led me on an amazing adventure visiting many continents and working with other like minded people. While I continue to be proud of my culture and heritage as an Arab, British, Muslim woman my life has been greatly enriched by my encounter with people of other backgrounds and traditions.

There are many thinkers in the world. Huntington amongst them, who feel that the next great clashes in the world, will be clashes of civilisations. I am not a philosopher, world thinker or academic researcher in this area. However my own personal experience of the world and encounters give me hope that his predictions are incorrect.

We may not be able to change the past but what we can do is write a new story for the future that does not live up to the patterns of the past. My own experience is that every meeting with "the Other" is an opportunity to turn stereotypes, judgement and ignorance into curiosity and learning. While there will always be extremists who confirm stereotypes and leaders who have their own personal agendas – ordinary people all over the world can reach out to each other and build networks of trust, friendships and write a different future together.

I am privileged and honoured to serve as President of Initiatives of Change International. The International Association, which is centred in Geneva, includes 34 national bodies but is active informally in over 60 countries. We have special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN (ECOSOC) and participatory status at the council of Europe.

Our mission is to inspire, equip and connect people to address world needs starting with themselves. We have three focus areas: 1) Trust building 2) ethical leadership and 3) sustainable living. All three focus areas are integral to achieving democratic equitable communities.

In the area of trust building, I could give many examples from around the world of people who are working to build understanding and tolerance. Amongst them an Imam and Pastor from Nigeria who are part of a trust building network who continue to make courageous steps to reach out and build peace together in their region of Nigeria. I understand that they have been previous guest speakers here at this centre. They have taken their trust building methodology to Kenya and more recently to Chad to continue to give hope that sustainable peace can be built in communities after conflict.

I think of friends in Lebanon across all religious divides, who even while their country was at war met to form bonds of friendships and trust to prepare for peace. Their work continues to be part of an important foundation for lasting peace there after many years of conflict and war. They are part of a coalition of NGO working together to support dialogue and peace. They have reached out to support others in Iraq, Syria and Egypt to overcome differences of opinions to work together for the future of those countries.

You may wonder why I have spoken so much about building trust in a talk about making democracy real. Without trust there can be no democracy. We have to be, at the very least, be ready to listen to differing views and perspectives. Each one of us has a different idea of what framework of government we want to deliver our aspirations for freedom and equity. As I have travelled the world and seen many different types of government, I am less clear what form of government I want but more clear about what real democracy means in terms of deliverables. Whatever the form of government I would want it to deliver the following: security, plurality of views, freedom from fear, access to health and education, meaningful work and dignity to all. The litmus test for me is whether that society guarantees the same rights to minority groups in society as it does to the majority, regardless of position, wealth and education.

But if we are going to build lasting democratic societies, the institutions alone are not enough. Institutions are only as good as the people who work in them. Lasting good governance and democracy will only be built if we as individuals embody in our own lives the values and integrity we wish to see in our societies. This places the emphasis on us as individuals to act alongside our governments and institutions. Democracy is too important to leave it to the politicians alone.

For me, this question of personal responsibility alongside government crystallized when I thought about the question of corruption. True democracy can't thrive alongside corruption. I used to get angry about the corruption I saw around me in society in the Middle East and elsewhere and I thought it was up to politicians to change this. When I started to work as an intern in Sydney, the hospital paid me too much salary one month. It was tempting to just keep the extra money. As I reflected on this in quiet one morning, I realise that if I kept this and did not return it, I was part of the problem of dishonesty and corruption. How could I expect politicians and business people to be honest and contribute to a democratic society free of corruption if I was not prepared to live honestly myself?

I decided to return the money to the hospital. Little did I realise the chaos this caused as this was something that had never happened before, they did not know where to put the money or what to do with it. Because I returned this money they felt that they had to check all my previous months' pay. In the end they found that they owed me money and to my surprise I had a cheque returned from the hospital that was 100 times larger than the amount I had sent them! It brought home to me this important link between personal conduct and integrity when dealing with wider problems in society.

One of the focus areas of lofC International work has been "ethical leadership". Good governance and democracy will only be built by developing a leadership culture that is based on moral integrity, compassion and selfless service. We need to equip a younger generation with the skills and tools that will enable them to be future leaders in their societies. Our conference centre in India has been running "Heart of Effective Leadership" training programmes for government and municipal administrators, civil servants, businesses and the Indian railway for many years. This year a pilot of the same "Heart of Effective Leadership" programme has been delivered for the first time in Europe – where this is a growing awareness of the need for a value based ethical approach to business and government there.

Many of you will be aware that the Middle East is going through a period of turmoil and political upheaval unlike any other period before. After the excitement of the "Arab spring" the hopes and dreams of many for democracy and freedom have not yet materialised. It is too early to know what the long- term outcome will be. The changes have caused much suffering, bloodshed and divisions. Democracy is a slow painful process that will take time to build.

What gives me reason for hope is what many ordinary people are doing despite the uncertainty. In Egypt, many non-governmental organisations have flourished as people realise that they can make a difference in small areas while they wait for the wider dreams to become reality. I think of one young Egyptian friend who is conducting dialogues between young and old with different political views. Another who is working in deprived areas of Egypt to build housing and deliver community training for underprivileged children.

Australia was the incubator of an international lofC training programme for women called "Creators of Peace". This programme is aimed at enabling women to be facilitators of mediation and trust building in their own communities. It has gone to over 40 countries around the world and this last 18 months peace circles and training programmes have taken place in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt.

All these are small steps but to me they are reasons for hope and the foundation of lasting peace and democracy as people learn to respect diversity and work together for the future they want. It is my belief that ordinary people can make a huge difference in their communities and in the world. We all have to believe that the way we live, the values we live out in our daily lives and our partnerships across divides – will build a world that is equitable and safe for all and where everyone has dignity and respect.

The Founder of Initiatives of Change, Frank Buchman said “ Peace is not just an idea; it is about people becoming different.” The same can be said about democracy – it is not just an idea, it requires people to become different and live differently. Without trust there can be no democracy, without ethical leaders we won’t have robust institutions that will keep democracy going. But on the slow road to build democracy each one of us is important. The way we choose to live and the partnerships we build with others is an essential building block. We can each play a part and make a difference. Ordinary people can do extraordinary things if we listen to the voice of our conscience and act with integrity. This is the great hope for the future of each country, democracy and the world.

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October 2014.
Public Lecture Series - Centre for Muslim States and Societies.