

Justice and Human Rights for All -
The Key to Peace and a Sustainable World

Neelan Tiruchelvam
Fifth Memorial Lecture

by
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I am deeply honoured to have been invited to deliver the fifth Neelan Tiruchelvam Memorial lecture. I, sadly, did not have the honour of meeting Neelan Tiruchelvam but I knew of him and of the fine values to which he dedicated his life, and of his terrible untimely death. This lecture provides me with an opportunity to show my respect for him and his work by trying to share with you a commitment to live by and advocate the values by which he lived and for which he gave his life.

My purpose today is to argue that the only way in which the current world can be managed and sustained is through a greater commitment to justice and human rights for all. Of course, almost all people and government claim to believe in justice and human rights. These – almost sacred – words trip off the tongue very easily. But we have only to reflect on the poverty, inequality, oppression and violence that afflict our world, to understand that very many people have no access to justice or respect for their human rights.

I believe that we are living at a time of great challenge and great opportunity. Our generation, like every previous generation has a duty to reach out to the poor and the needy and to seek justice and the

reduction of suffering. All the great world religions impose such obligations upon their adherents. And all moral teachings require a respect for justice and the equal worth of each person. But our generation has a greater obligation than previous generations because we are living at a time when humanity has the capacity to eliminate extreme poverty from the human condition. And in addition, we are living at a time when poverty, inequality and environmental degradation threaten the future of everyone, whether they are rich or poor, or live in the north or south. It is often argued that what is morally right is rarely politically attractive. Whether or not that was true in the past, it is true no longer. If we fail to make progress in reducing poverty and sharing the earth's environmental resources more equitably, we are heading for turmoil and catastrophe and that will cause great suffering to all.

Little did we realise in 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down and Nelson Mandela was released from prison, what a challenge this new era would pose. At that time, a wave of hope and optimism spread across the world. We dreamed of a reduction of defence spending, the end of apartheid and a new global community committed to development and mutual respect. And for a few years it did seem as though we were making progress with velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe, Reagan and Gorbachev agreeing large scale nuclear disarmament and Nelson Mandela – the greatest politician of our generation – elected as President of South Africa. But there were also warning signs – a terrible genocide in Rwanda in 1994 when 1million people were massacred in 100 days; and despite the UN mission in Rwanda sending repeated warnings the Security Council refused to act, thus breaching their obligations under the Genocide Convention,. And in the Balkans, former Communist leaders reached for ethnic nationalism and ethnic hatred in order to keep themselves in power. This led to large scale ethnic cleansing, mass rape and a very ineffectual international response. The end of the Cold War also led to a withdrawal of interest in Africa. Aid spending was cut and international engagement was withdrawn and in many countries in

the poorest continent weak states with bloated armies descended into civil war, causing growing impoverishment and suffering. And thus in the post Cold War world we moved from an avoidance of conflict through a threat of Mutually Assured Destruction to a deeply disturbing proliferation of civil war and ethnic and religious conflict across the world.

All of this seems very primitive and very depressing – Hutu versus Tutsi, Serb versus Bosnian, pastoral Darfurian versus agricultural Darfurian and so on. Far from a new world order, we seem to be generating a new world of disorder with a growth of religious fanaticism fanning the flames of hatred and conflict. And thus we see a growth of Hindu fundamentalism in India leading to strains and tension and terrible violence in Gujerat; Christian fundamentalism in the USA leading to a significant grouping in President Bush's coalition of support believing that there must be a Jewish state in historical Palestine before the Messiah returns and the righteous ascend into heaven; the rise of Osama bin Laden who seeks to resist the oppression of Muslim peoples through a jihad that justifies the targeting of innocent civilians; and Jewish fundamentalists settling on territory occupied by force and claiming that their right to oppress and murder Palestinians flows from their Holy Book which shows that God assigned this land to them.

There has been too little discussion of why this post Cold War globalising era has generated such an outbreak of fanaticism in the world's great religions. In the case of Rwanda and Darfur, it is clearly partly the ancient cause of desperate poverty which makes people believe they will be able to dominate the land and live better if they can eliminate another group. But in the case of India, the USA and Israel the cause is not poverty. Is it perhaps a desperate search to assert identity in a world of rapid change where globalisation seems to be shaking and changing old certainties and creating a sense of insecurity across the world? It is also a reflection of a breakdown of international order, a commitment to international law and respect for human rights.

My view is that we are living at a time of massive historical change and in an era which contains the promise of great historical advance, but the world lacks both the political and intellectual leadership to understand what is possible and instead we are moving backwards into conflict, hatred and division. This is dangerous and ugly in itself, but unless we change direction, it is likely that the bloodshed and bitterness will get worse and that respect for international law, the rule of law and human rights will deteriorate even further.

We are living in an era when the old order – the Cold War order – has broken down. And globalisation is generating a great unease at the speed with which everything is changing. But the era also has enormous potential for advance if we are willing to share the capital, knowledge and technology we now have available, we could see the biggest and speediest reduction of poverty that humanity has ever seen. I think this era is comparable – but on a global scale – to the potential of the period of the industrial revolution for Europe and North America. Thus in the 1820s, in my constituency in Birmingham, people poured in from deep poverty in the countryside of England to live in squalor and poverty, disease and illiteracy, to work in the new factories. Enormous new wealth was being created by the new technologies; the question was how was it to be shared? The next 100 years saw a struggle for democracy, the right to organise in Trade Unions and form political parties committed to sharing the wealth in order to offer the chance of a decent life for all. I believe that this era offers the same potential to the world but we need to generate the political movements, leadership and ideas that enable us to manage this era in a way that will benefit humanity.

However, the current growth of ethnic and religious division could hold back our capacity to develop the potential of this era. But on this there are contradictory developments. Improved communications mean that people witness the suffering of others and call out for the Kosovan refugees, the students in Tiananmen Square, the little girl born in the tree during the Mozambiquan floods

in March 2000. People identify with each other regardless of ethnicity and geography. And thus the Universal Declaration of Human Rights becomes an emotional reality. I have described the growth of religious fanaticism and conflict but at the same time people are moving across the world in ever greater numbers and in the great cities of the world people of different ethnic origins and religion often live comfortably side by side in mutual respect and friendship. In my constituency in Birmingham, there is a rich diversity of people. My origins are that my great, great grandfather came to Birmingham to escape the famines of the 1840s which decimated Ireland. Birmingham was one of the early centres of the industrial revolution and therefore always drew in people who came from elsewhere to work and in the hope of a better life. In the 1930s there was a great worldwide recession, but it was the beginnings of the car industry in Birmingham so people came from Ireland, Scotland and Wales for work. In the 1950s and 1960s after the Second World War, Britain had full employment and insufficient workers and people were recruited from Commonwealth countries, from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Caribbean. And since then with the growing turbulence and mobility of the world, we have refugees and asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and many, many other places. Thus in my constituency as in many UK cities, the majority of people originate from countries that were colonised by Britain. I think someone labelled this as the south settling in the north.

This is also an aspect of globalisation and it contains within it something very fine. It means that within an area of about five square miles, we have Cathedrals of the Church of England and Catholic Church, which for centuries persecuted each other. There are also the headquarters of Methodism and other non-established churches that in their time we also persecuted. Since the 1960s have been added African Caribbean churches, Gurdwaras – reflecting all the caste and other groupings that are clustered in Ladywood. We have small local mosques, bigger mosques and Birmingham Central Mosque. We have small Buddhist shrines and now a very fine new Pagoda. And we have the children of all these communities in local schools together

celebrating each other's festivals and learning to understand and respect each other's religion. We even have a mosque which was funded by Iraqi money which was known as the Saddam Hussein mosque, which stayed untouched through both the 1991 and 2003 wars. I say all of this not just to describe to you the enjoyable and fine diversity of my city, but in the face of the ethnic conflict and division that we have seen elsewhere – including, tragically, here in Sri Lanka – I want to remind us that it is possible for people of different ethnicities and religious backgrounds and commitment to live together in mutual respect and to learn to be bigger and finer people because they learn from each other to understand so much better the diversity of human history and human experience.

We also have children of our city in Guantanamo Bay. Three from just north of the city have been released and have dreadful stories to tell of how they were treated. But Moazzam Begg remains and his father campaigns for the release of his son with enormous dignity. And the overwhelming bulk of the people of the city are sympathetic and have great respect for this dignified and distressed father who simply asks for justice, and a proper trial if his son has done anything wrong. In these circumstances, we also see a rise of Islamaphobia and the Muslim population of Birmingham are feeling distressed and insecure. But as I keep saying to them, it is important to remember most of the people of Birmingham and of the whole of Europe feel basically the same as they do about the war in Iraq. And again and again I stress to all in our city that a multicultural city like ours cannot afford to become divided, otherwise we shall all be in trouble. And in this sense Birmingham is a microcosm of the world we are in. If we continue to become more divided, we shall all be in trouble.

On top of this new world disorder, we have great poverty and great wealth side by side in a world where the new technologies mean that the poor of the world see how the others live and are entitled to be disgruntled and angry. There are 6 billion of us now sharing this small planet of ours. In 1900 there were just over 1 billion of us. By 1960 there were 3 billion and now we are 6 billion. The projections

are that there will be 8-9 billion of us by 2030-50 when world population will stabilise. This growth in world population is a reflection of development. As life gets better, people live longer and more children survive so population grows rapidly before it stabilises. Thus in Britain the population was about 10 million in 1700 and is now nearly 60 million. This wave of change is rolling across the world, but it means there are a lot more of us sharing the precious, finite environmental resources of the world and it helps to explain some of the strain. At the same time, humanity is urbanising. For the first time in human history, more than half of us live in cities and the projection is that this will reach 60-65% in another 15-20 years. I believe this will have political consequences. The urban poor living in the vast growing slums of the developing world are likely to be less patient than were the rural poor as they contrast their lives with the material wealth available in the OECD countries.

Of the 6 billion of us who share this planet, 1 in 5 lives in extreme poverty – with too little to eat, little access to education or healthcare, no guarantee of clean water and a constant struggle to survive and fend off ill health. Half of humanity has no access to sanitation – a cause of humiliation as well as ill health in our rapidly urbanising world. And across the world environmental resources are under strain, fish stocks are declining, desertification and land degradation is spreading, forests are being destroyed, we are losing masses of the bio-diversity that nature has given to us and global warming is now an accepted as a dangerous reality by almost all the world experts.

Global warming will cause great turbulence in weather pattern and strain on all countries, but as ever the poor will suffer most and low lying lands and islands will be wiped out across the world. I will take one example which helps bring home to us what it will mean. Bangladesh, the largest least developed country in the world will increase its population by 50 per cent and lose about one third of its territory over the next 30 years. Where are the extra people to go? What is to become of them? And this story will be repeated worldwide.

In 1997, at a UN conference in Kyoto, it was agreed that the industrialised countries would make a start in dealing with this problem by cutting their carbon dioxide emissions by 5.2 per cent of their 1990 levels during the five year period from 2008-2012. This was a limited agreement because all this would achieve would be to prevent things getting worse, not to put things right. The plan was to go on from this first step to ask rapidly developing countries like India and China to agree to constrain their emissions because the potential destructive capacity of these two countries of over 1 billion people each is enormous. But despite Russia's welcome announcement that it will ratify the treaty and therefore bring it into effect, the Kyoto agreement has almost broken down because the USA which is the world's biggest polluter will not agree to constrain its emissions. And thus we are stacking up enormous problems for the future.

A few years ago, I was hopeful that we were beginning to face up to the new dangers facing the world. At the United Nations General Assembly meeting which was called to mark the beginning of a new millennium and attended by more Prime Ministers and Heads of State than any previous UN meeting, the world agreed to work together to reduce poverty. All countries committed themselves to meeting the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, which meant halving poverty, getting all children into school and reducing infant and maternal mortality by improving access to healthcare, clean water and sanitation. Following this the IMF, World Bank, regional development banks and OECD all signed up to the targets. Obviously halving poverty was not enough, but this would mean 1 billion people lifting themselves out of poverty by 2015. Population growth means that they will be replaced by 1 billion new people, but at least the world would have learned to work together to systematically reduce poverty.

This agreement was important partly because it created a new focus and determination to reduce poverty and also because it recognised the fact that people need better income, education,

healthcare and sanitation to sustainably improve their lives. It was also important that all the countries of the world had agreed on what needed to be done. There should be no more problems of donors of aid forcing countries to act against their own best judgement, all were agreed on what needed to be done and how to measure success in reducing poverty.

And then on September 11 2001 two airliners were flown into the World Trade Centre in New York and nearly 3000 people originating from more than 40 countries died. The first reaction of the world was to act together in response to such a serious crime. The UN Security Council passed a resolution requiring all countries to share information, tighten up on money laundering and co-operate to take action against those who had taken the lives of innocent civilians in this way. The General Assembly passed a unanimous resolution of concern and support. *Le Monde* famously produced its headline "We are all Americans now". The whole world stood together in solidarity with America in the face of such a monstrous crime.

And, it is now being forgotten, but the first instinct of the US was to act in co-operation with the rest of the world through the multilateral system. Thus, talks to launch a new round of trade talks had failed in Seattle but at Doha the world agreed to launch a new round and the agenda was focused on making trade rules fairer for poor countries. At the UN meeting on financing development in Monterrey in Mexico in March 2002, the world agreed on the best mixture of free market and state power to create the development necessary to reduce poverty and the richer countries also agreed, after a decade of decline, development assistance would be considerably increased. And then at the UN meeting on Environment and Sustainable Development called to review progress since the Rio meeting 10 years earlier, the world agreed that environmental resources must be fairly shared to encourage development for the poor and sustainability for the planet. In the face of the attack on America on September 11 2001, the first response of the world was to stand together and to commit to a continuing focus on justice and poverty reduction.

But then the disastrous decision was taken by the US to launch an ill considered war on Iraq and the Prime Minister of the UK misled his country into supporting that war. The consequence was to split and weaken the UN, undermine international law and a commitment to multilateral action and the rule of law. It also strengthened Al Qaeda, created a growing bitter divide between the Muslim world and the West and fanned the flames of Islamaphobia.

So now the world is in very grave trouble and to my shame the UK is part of the problem. We appear to have forgotten the lessons learned in dealing with conflict in Northern Ireland. In the early stages of the British response to the upsurge of IRA violence in the 1970s, a repressive Prevention of Terrorism Act and the introduction of internment without trial acted to increase anger and resentment and therefore as a recruiting sergeant for the IRA. Britain learned from experience that all paramilitary movements depend on support from the people from whom they arose. If the people are mistreated, insurgency grows. Once such movements are in place, they are difficult to defeat, but progress depends on the security response working in parallel with a strong commitment to justice and a righting of the wrongs that led to support for violence. It is in this way that we are now approaching the end of violent resistance in Irish history. These lessons must be applied to the Middle East and more widely. Otherwise, we are looking forward to decades of growing hatred and division.

There is no doubt that the world is in trouble. Just as we felt hopeful in 1989, there is a mood of despondency and disappointment now. But Neelan Tiruchelvam tells us that "In the struggle for human values, it is immoral to submit to despair, to cynicism." And he is right and thus it is our duty in each of our countries and linked up with each other internationally to be determined to correct the grave mistakes being made in the current era and insist on shaping the potential of globalisation to the benefit of humanity and to a sustainable future for our planet.

My diagnosis is that we are suffering from a serious problem of mind-lag in the political leadership of the world. Those in leading positions in politics, the media and the civil service, rose to the top in the old order. We are living at a time of very great historical change – the end of the Cold War, an integrated world economy, new communication technology – which is driving rapid change everywhere. The old elite seem to be incapable of understanding the change that is taking place, of responding to the challenge of the new era and of understanding that a commitment to equity, development, the rule of law and universal rules is the only way to make the world safe and sustainable.

It is notable that the Clinton administration was reluctant to embrace the Kyoto protocol, the International Criminal Court, the treaty banning land mines and even the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Perhaps it is difficult for the only remaining great power to understand that an international order based on fair rules and equity is in everyone's interest. And it is notable how the Bush administration rushed to replace the old war on communism with the 'war on terrorism'. It was as though they were incapable of imagining a world of multilateral co-operation founded on the rule of law. They needed a new enemy in order to understand their role in the world. This is not to say that the threat from Al Qaeda to the US is not very serious or that the attack on the Twin Towers was not a terrible crime, but a response that declares a generalised war on terror is a nonsense and, as we have seen since the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, doomed to failure.

The reality of course is that it is impossible to prosecute a war on terror. It is like declaring a war on war. All war uses violence and violence creates terror. We have religious, moral and legal teachings on when war is just, but those who are strongly committed to the use of military force cannot consistently argue that the use of force by the poor and dispossessed is always wrong. The obsession with terrorism, which is a tactic – the tactic of the powerless – has made it harder in a whole range of contexts to analyse sensibly its roots in injustice.

International law recognises a right to resist occupation. This does not mean, however, that it is ever right to target civilians. We are living at a time of great moral deterioration. The US, supported by the UK, brushes aside international law and is involved in the use of torture and abuse of human rights in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. And the Al Qaeda movement, which feeds on justified anger at oppression and injustice in the Middle East and elsewhere, targets innocent civilians and encourages the terrible use of suicide bombers that began, I think, here in Sri Lanka.

And so this so-called 'war on terror' is becoming a very dangerous game. If there is no commitment to international law and justice then, might is right. The US has more military power than any other nation in the world. But we have seen in Afghanistan and Iraq that military power alone cannot create stable states and it certainly cannot make the US secure. If the war on terror continues on current lines, we are heading for decades of continuing violence and bloodshed which will inflict terrible suffering and instability across the world.

Those of use who reject the current approach to the 'war on terror' and the immorality of targeting innocent civilians as a way of protesting at injustice must demonstrate that there is a realistic and better way of resolving the problems that underlie the current conflicts.

I believe that it is quite easy to see the way forward in the Middle East. Delivering the policy would take time and face difficulties, but the principles on which it should be based are very clear. As I say to my Muslim constituents when we discuss these matters, the Muslims of the world do not have a different view from the rest of the world. The people of the UK, of Europe and most of the world agree that the suffering of the Palestinian people is unbearable and strongly support a settlement based on a two-state solution. The Palestinian and Israeli people also support such a solution. The problem we have is an inadequacy of Israeli and US political leadership. The present difficulties that the US faces in Iraq, and their growing need for international support creates the possibility of the world uniting to

demand progress in establishing a Palestinian state and a genuine commitment to hand Iraq over to the Iraqis as a condition of international help. This should be accompanied by an agreement that all WMD, including Israel's nuclear weapons, should be removed from the Middle East. Such progress would lance the boil at the centre of the Middle East conflict and open up the prospect of an era of progress and development in the region.

Beyond the Middle East, the world must seek to resolve the conflicts in other places like Kashmir, Chechnya, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Great Lakes region Africa. And then we must urgently get back to a focus on reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development, preventing conflict, rebuilding weak states and overcoming the catastrophes that global warming and all of its consequences are likely to bring to the world.

All of this is very daunting and depressing, but the picture is not all negative. In the last 50 years more people have lifted themselves out of poverty than in the previous 500 years – more children survive, fewer women die in childbirth, more are literate, more have clean water. And more people live under democratic systems than ever before. There has been great progress, but there are more people than ever before and therefore more poor people. We know what needs to be done, we know how to make progress, but we need to scale up our efforts to prevent a massive growth of the numbers living in poverty. 90% of the 3 billion new people who will be added to the human family over the next 30-50 years will live in developing countries. If we do not make better progress, they will be born into a growing sea of terrible poverty in a globalising world where they see the material wealth that 20% of us enjoy. It is hard to believe that such a world is politically, let alone morally, sustainable.

My conclusion is that there is no way forward for the world other than a stronger, universal commitment to justice, the rule of law and respect for the human rights of all people. And respect for human rights requires a commitment to development. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights imposes on all of us a duty to do all in

our power to secure all rights – including social and economic rights – for all people. We could do so much more. Abject poverty could be removed from the human condition over the next 20-30 years. There are two futures ahead of us; one is to continue on the path we are on now with every growing turmoil, conflict, bloodshed and environmental catastrophe; the other is a genuine commitment to global justice. The world's only super power is currently demonstrating that the use of force cannot make the world safe and stable. My argument is that justice can. But there are rocky times ahead. We must work hard to create a determination amongst the people of the world that will force our governments to commit to the better path. It is the only way in which we can hand on a safe and sustainable world to the next generation.

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