

Hilary Benn, Secretary of State for International Development, Speech at Demos, Westminster Hall, 23rd October 2006

“Making politics work for the poor: democracy and development”

I have had the privilege of being in this job for three years now. I have been an MP for seven years. I spent 20 years as a local councillor. Counting up, it turns out I have fought 12 elections as a candidate for political office. And as I reflect on these experiences of my own, and of watching politics in the UK and other parts of the world for forty years now, one thing above all is clear to me. Politics matters. Politics changes things. And it is democracy that makes politics possible.

Now, you might think I would say that, wouldn't I. But I think that we need to assert this truth, not least because we live in an age when it is now alarmingly fashionable to decry the capacity of politics to change things, even though all the evidence shows that from the creation of the health service to the achievements of 2005 on aid and debt, it was politics that made these things, and many others, happen.

But this evening I want to ask some questions about our politics and I would like to hear your views. This is one of the reasons why I think speeches are important; not only for me to say what I think, but for you all to tell me what you think, and indeed where you feel I may be wrong!

Two points to start with.

First, politics determines how a society makes choices and how competing interests are reconciled. We all know that wants will always exceed our capacity to meet them.

Second, the sort of politics a country has matters greatly to those who live there.

These are not controversial observations. But I think the best kind of politics is *democratic* politics. At its root is a belief in certain fundamental things. Consensus, which was once called the “agreement to differ”, a means of mediating among competing interests peacefully, and using accommodation, negotiation and compromise to sort things out.

Democratic politics certainly meets the citizen test. A worldwide Gallup poll in 2005 sought the views of 50,000 people in 65 countries. Eight of ten citizens said that despite its problems, democracy was the best system of government. In Africa it was nine out of ten.

Just ask yourself. Do you want to live in a democracy? Well I do. And so do most people.

Now, you may be wondering what all this has got to do with development. Surely DFID's job is to promote sustainable development, to improve the welfare of poor people across the world, and not to engage in the difficult business of politics?

To which I would reply that development and reducing poverty – in any society - are not only about what Amartya Sen calls the “freedoms from”. The things we fought hard for in our own history. The process by which Beveridge's five giants of Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor, and Idleness were slain by social security, healthcare, education, housing and employment.

No, development, if it is to mean anything – whether here in the UK or internationally – has also to be about what Sen calls the “freedoms to”: the freedom to choose - to choose people to represent your views; the freedom to make your views heard; to associate freely with others; to join a political party or a trade union; the freedom to worship and practice your own religion.

If you ask poor people, they'll tell you how much these things mean to them. Interviews done by the World Bank with 60,000 poor men and women from scores of countries showed that poverty for them above all is about having no power and no voice, and about shame and humiliation. That's what they said. Our best defence against inhumane conditions is a belief in our own humanity, but this can only be fully realised if our rights to be human are also realised.

I want to argue that it is democratic politics, and yes, it is indeed democracy, that is how we achieve these things. Development has to be about getting the politics right because development and progress cannot be achieved if the political system excludes the majority and denies them their birthright.

At this point let me make one thing absolutely clear. I am not saying that democracy is a pre-requisite for achieving some of the "freedoms from". We all know that this is not the case. It is possible to reduce poverty without freedom or democracy. Just look at China. It has led the world in the fight against poverty. Over 400 million people have been lifted out of poverty over the past two decades. Rather than just the three years they got in the 1960s, most of China's 135 million children are now getting nine years of compulsory education. Infant mortality has been cut by a quarter.

Over this period, China has steadily become more responsive to its people, and I think this process will continue as the country faces more and more outwards. But I do believe it is not possible to develop the full range of "freedoms to" I described earlier without the culture of democratic politics and the practice of democracy. And I think that the freedoms that democratic culture brings to individual citizens are fundamental to development.

Why?

Because democracy is the best way for citizens to claim their rights. Development has to be both about achieving the Millennium Development Goals; and at the same time helping people create the kind of societies they wish to live in.

And because it's what we need to help us face up to the new challenges that we, and poor countries, will have to contend with in the coming years. To list a few: Climate Change. Globalisation. Urbanisation. Migration. The information revolution and a 24 hour media. The rise of India, China, Brazil and South Africa. Terrorism.

Getting our politics right will be vital to building, not just stable, peaceful and fair societies, but a stable, peaceful and fairer world. On this very small, fragile, interdependent planet, we can't have one without the other, and democracy will help us do all this.

Now, there are many definitions of democracy – we could argue about them all night – but they certainly include:

- A system where government decisions on policy are vested in elected representatives;
- Free, fair and frequent election of these representatives;
- Freedom of expression; citizens being able to say what they think;
- Access to alternative sources of information from government - a free media;
- Having the right to form and join independent associations; and
- Inclusive citizenship where no-one is excluded or discriminated against.

It is these characteristics of political democracy that enable us to join with others who share a vision of a better world; to make our views heard; to choose leaders to represent our views; and to hold our leaders to account. And for those of us so inclined, it gives us the freedom to seek the privilege of holding public office.

So democracy as we know is about so much more than just having a vote. It's a set of values and institutions. And while democracy is about rights, it's also about responsibilities. It demands something of us. That's why politics is about more than just shopping for policies.

It is democracy that has sustained and shared out the prosperity we have achieved here in Britain. Our history tells us how those who had been excluded from society acted on their conviction that without political representation things would never change.

So we can look back at our long and slow progress to democracy. We can look back to the first elected Parliament called by Simon de Montfort in the thirteenth century, to Cromwell's angry young soldiers debating their right to universal suffrage with their officers at Putney in the seventeenth century, to a hundred years ago when Labour first achieved representation in the House of Commons. As our election Manifesto of 1906 said: "The House of Commons is supposed to be the people's House, and yet the people are not there." 29 Labour MPs changed all that, and showed that democracy could evolve.

What we have also learned is that what we now call the institutions of good governance do not emerge overnight. And they certainly cannot be

transplanted or imposed from outside. As Ghandi said, "...the spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without. It must come from within."

This leads me directly to two more difficult issues: how, and under what circumstances does democracy emerge in the first place, and how are democracies then sustained?

As countries move from a non-democratic to a democratic government, the early democratic "arrangements" gradually become established "practice", which over time settle into "institutions".

How long these transitions will take cannot be known in advance. And of course there are hiccups and reversals along the way. However, in many countries in Africa today, it is clear that new democratic arrangements are beginning to solidify into practice, and may be on the way to becoming robust democratic institutions.

Earlier this month in Zambia - fifteen years from the end of the one party state and after four national elections, one change of government and two new presidents – almost three-quarters of the electorate turned out to vote, many queuing from 4am in the morning. Far more than turned out in my own constituency in the last election. These were peaceful elections with the results accepted by all the Presidential candidates and political parties. To me this says that democracy is becoming established practice: and I am delighted. It means that people are now "agreeing to differ".

We can never be sure when democracies will emerge. No-one predicted the sudden fall of the Berlin Wall, or the orange revolution in the Ukraine. Some doubted the readiness of Afghanistan for elections. But once democracy does emerge, all the evidence tells us that people like it and become very attached to it.

What does all this mean for DFID? I think the implications are profound.

Our recent white paper on development made governance its central theme. It's why we called it "Making governance work for the poor".

As I have reflected on attempts by donors to help build effective states in poor countries, it is clear that there have been two broad approaches: first there were those who saw democracy as an end in itself, and tended to ignore the need for the state to be able to manage its affairs and deliver services; and second, there were those who focused mainly on building the capability of the state, but who ignored the politics.

Not surprisingly I think we need to do both. Putting politics into our work on governance, and, democracy into our work on the effective state. We can do more to support the further emergence of democratic politics as I have described it. Not a political system - but its principle and its values.

Our recent white paper took the first steps down this road. It's based on three things: capability, responsiveness, and accountability.

First, all governments need to be capable. It's simply about being able to get things done. Does government have the money, the will and the capacity to build wells, provide health services to villagers, offer good education to

children and raise taxes to do all these things? When those are absent, countries and their people suffer.

Second, governments must respond to the aspirations of their citizens. Representative government, and that includes respecting people's civil and political rights, can make a real difference to this.

Third is accountability. This means having to explain what you are doing, and why, and answer questions on what you have done. It applies to public officials, to ministers and to governments.

It's also about legitimacy. The extent to which people think those who govern have earned the right to govern. And, in the long-term the best way to gain legitimacy is to rule justly in the public interest.

And if our shared goal of accountable government is to be realised, so that people in developing countries look, not to people like me, but to their own governments to sort out their problems, and not us, then we need to help build the capacity to do exactly that.

So, do the three elements of good governance - capability, accountability and responsiveness - add up to democracy? Well, no, they don't. They take us a fair way towards a democratic politics but they are not one and the same thing.

Let me explain - I have just been to Vietnam. I was hugely impressed. Poverty fell from three quarters in the late 1980s to under a third in 2002, with extreme poverty half of that – the fastest reduction in poverty in human history.

The government is not democratic in the way I have described, but the state is capable and responsive, and there are many elements of accountability, although in ways that perhaps you and I would not immediately recognise. The National Assembly is now able to veto and amend the national budget; it has sacked ministers and rejected laws. That was not always the case. Its proceedings are shown on TV, and heated debate and hard-hitting questions make it one of the most watched programmes in Vietnam. I think our BBC Parliament Channel would be envious of the ratings!

Is Vietnam moving in the right direction? Undoubtedly it is. Is it yet a democracy? No it isn't.

But if politics matters, and democratic politics at that, how will all this change the way DFID goes about its business? What will we do differently?

First, and most fundamentally, we will consider the "freedoms to" as equally important as the "freedoms from". This puts rights - the 'freedoms to' - at the very centre. Human rights, alongside reducing poverty and sound financial management, are at the heart of our development partnerships. But we need to explain more clearly what this will mean for the way we work.

Second, we will take a more complete view of governance. It's not just about a capable central government: it's about a capable state at the centre founded on improved accountability and responsiveness. And that means a clear commitment to an increasingly democratic politics that is inclusive.

Practically, we will continue to help to build more capable states – often focused on the executive. But we will ensure that this ‘traditional’ work also enhances accountability. Like in Tanzania where opinion formers from outside government have become more involved in public financial management programmes, providing the opportunities and strengthening their ability to see and question how public money is managed and spent.

We will also expand our work on accountability. This means working more with parliaments, judiciaries, electoral commissions, auditors and accountants general.

Civil society groups and the media are vital – in Kenya it has been a continuous media debate about grand corruption – reporting on the Githongo dossier - that has helped contribute to the unprecedented resignation of three ministers. It had never happened before in Kenyan politics.

We are setting up a new £100 million Governance and Transparency Fund, and have launched consultation on its design. It will support civil society, a free media, parliamentarians and trade unions – those working in transparency - in improving accountability.

And we recognise that the real politics of the countries we support often takes place behind these formal institutions. And it requires us to understand more and engage with informal mechanisms that can subvert – or help achieve – good governance.

And in doing all this we will hang on to what we have learned about doing aid right. That progress depends fundamentally on what the citizens of a country can do for themselves. That effective action on our part requires understanding of the political contexts in which we’re operating, to ensure we work with the right people, including at community level, in the right ways to help make progress.

And we are doing this in Afghanistan through the National Solidarity Programme. This is a nationwide programme of support to local governance and reconstruction. Community Development Councils, elected by secret ballot, are responsible for planning and implementing local reconstruction projects.

So far, grants have been distributed to over 11,000 of these councils in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. In some places these Councils, as well as starting debate about development, are even standing up to local warlords, and in the history of Afghanistan that is remarkable.

And just reflect that Afghanistan could hold elections and prove the cynics and the doubters wrong, and reflect that 25% of those elected are women – far more than here.

I was in the Democratic Republic of Congo recently where the elections were supported by many international partners, all working to a common plan. When there was no time to use standard procedures for preparing ballot papers, South Africa stepped in. When civic education needed a boost,

working through the religious groups, DFID took this on. If partners had not worked together - with excellent leadership from the UN system - there would have been serious gaps in funding, and some support would not have been provided in time.

All about getting the democratic mechanisms to work. But the big test will be whether people accept the result. And the responsibility on politicians to rise to that challenge.

But in promoting democracy we must not fall into the trap of merely creating an empty shell. The institutions we have in the UK took hundreds of years to evolve through a process of bargaining between the state and groups in society. They cannot be constructed by simply transferring models of democracy from rich to poor countries. But the demand for democracy in poorer countries is already there, and it is in the interests of states to become more democratic.

The final point I want come to is about the nature of our own politics in Britain.

Is our democracy perfect? I don't think so. It's why we talk about it so much, and why we seek to improve it.

I joke with ministers I meet from developing countries about why I feel sometimes so impatient. I don't want it to take so long for them, for it took us over a thousand years.

We know it is about more than just the formal institutions of elections for this fragile flower to survive. Ours is also a living political culture – one of participation, free expression, of frank and open debate about the society we live in, of feeling that democracy can work for us, of seeing that politics can make a difference. It is why it remains such a powerful idea.

But to do any or all of these things, democracy requires participation. That's what makes it different from shopping. We have to join in.

It could be watching the news and discussing it with family and friends, attending a PTA meeting, giving up time to be a volunteer, or helping out in a community organisation. We participate when we push our employer to improve time off for parents. Or when we write to our MP. Or even when we simply say good morning to our neighbours.

Politics cannot – does not – exist in a vacuum, separate from the rest of society. Politics is society. So we should worry about those who feel separated from it. Those who feel that decisions are being taken too far away from them – be it Westminster, Brussels, Kinshasa or Kabul – by politicians who seem too distant.

We should worry about people at the bottom of society, any society, who have very little, and who are preyed upon by those who say it's all the fault of someone else who, likely as not, is also at the bottom of the pile, but may have a different colour skin, or a different religion, or a different language.

People who worry about the dizzying pace of change in the world, who see communities transforming before their very eyes, and feel it is a process they have no control over.

People who worry about their identity, their culture, and their way of life, be they Christian, Muslim or of no faith at all.

We have to face up to the consequences of a better informed, better-educated, more discerning electorate. This is a good thing. I don't believe that people are any less interested in politics than was the case in the past; but the belief in parties has declined. This is partly because of the collapse of the great ideological divide that defined politics in the 20th century, partly the result of the way we conduct ourselves, and partly because of the way the media covers what we do.

Some of us may find all these things uncomfortable, but we ignore them at our peril. And for a democratic culture to remain in good health to tackle them, there are some things we need to think about.

Politics has to connect to people. The more we are seen as managers or 'doers unto others' the greater the risk that people will lose confidence. At its best, politics helps people achieve what they want. And when people see politics – and politicians – alongside them in dealing with their hopes and fears, they have greater faith in the process.

The second is that we have to move away from the vicious cycle of boom and bust in expectation. In the run-up to elections, there are immense pressures on politicians to promise that they can solve all of the problems, and after an election great expectations that this will happen. Life isn't quite like that. And when people realise this, disappointment sets in. And in truth, it's not a very healthy way of conducting a personal relationship between human beings, any more than one between government and those who give their consent to be governed.

I think we need to replace this with a more grown-up politics. A politics that is longer term; that is more participative; that is clear and honest about the choices to be made. A politics which listens to what people have to say, even if we can't always do it. A politics which says that what we do, what you do, what I do, matters.

So, there we are. None of this means, that we should in any way limit our ambition or our belief in politics as a means of changing things. If we hadn't had that belief in politics, what we achieved on development last year would not have been possible. The quarter of a million people who marched in Edinburgh would have marched in vain. We didn't make poverty history, but we did make progress. If our 19th century ancestors had not believed in the right of all people to an education, we would not have achieved it.

As we hope that tomorrow will be better than today, we have a duty to bring this great instrument of human progress to bear on the great challenges of the 21st century, just as we used it in centuries gone by to transform our own lives.

Not for nothing is democracy our best and only hope for the future of humankind.