

MAKING DEMOCRACY REAL – EVERYONE CAN PLAY A PART

Thank you for inviting me to give a lecture in this historic memorial hall - which is dedicated in memory of Yukio Ozaki the father of Japanese democracy. I had the great pleasure of meeting his daughter Mrs Sohma, when she visited Australia, when I was a student and am delighted to have recently met Mrs Hara who is interpreting for me tonight. It is indeed a special honour and privilege to be speaking here on the subject of “Making democracy real- everyone can play a part”.

Before I address the subject of this 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 helps you understand why I view the world as I do. It also colours my thoughts on the question of democracy and why I feel everyone 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. I went to school in Egypt and then in Australia where my father was Egyptian Ambassador. I did my medical training in Australia, then specialised in paediatric emergency medicine. For the last 30 years my home has been Liverpool – the city of the Beetles and football – where I work in a children’s hospital with one of the largest and busiest children’s emergency department in the Western Europe.

When I was a teenager in Australia I was confronted by many stereotypes. The western media portrayal of the Arab, Muslim world and especially Muslim women did not match my extended family and friends – many of whom were professional women doctors, dentists, architects, university lecturers. I thought 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 government 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 the only Muslim in an intergenerational group of Christians. I was struck by the quality of life 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 the their approach.

Initiatives of Change is a world wide movement of people of diverse cultures and backgrounds, who are committed to transformation of society is 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 against the four absolute standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love I was surprised by two thoughts: I was jealous and dishonest. I was jealous of my older brother who was an extrovert, fun loving person. I was angry about corruption and dishonesty in the 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 apologised to my brother and was honest with my father. I felt a real freedom as a result so I decided to continue this experiment: having daily times of quiet reflection and continuing to measure my own conduct against these four moral values.

As I continued on this adventure I started to read and learn more about my faith as a Muslim. There are 5 pillars to being a Muslim: 1) Belief that there is one God and the Mohamed is his final prophet after a long line of prophets sent to enlighten the world. 2) Prayer 5 times a day 3) Fasting during the month of Ramadan, which starts this weekend, 4) "Zakat" – paying a percentage of your earnings and saving to help the poor and needy in society and 5) Pilgrimage once in a lifetime to Mecca.

I also discovered a lot more about my faith and its philosophy. In the Koran is a passage that says "God does not change the state of a nation until the people themselves change". One of the most important aspects of faith is in personal conduct and conduct towards others. I also discovered that within the Koran is a statement what 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 I tried to pray and reflect on what my specific vocation and calling was – I felt I had two callings. One was to children and their health and well being through my work as a paediatrician. The other calling was to build bridges of trust and understanding between people of different cultures, background 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 encounters 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 civilizations. I am not a philosopher, world thinker or academic researcher in this area. However my own personal experience of the world and encounters of different cultures and civilizations gives me hope that their predictions are incorrect. We do not have to live up to the predictions of these distinguished thinkers.

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 as 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 we are also 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 key focus areas:

- 1) Trust building
- 2) Ethical leadership
- 3) Sustainable living

In the area of trust building, I could give many examples from around the world of people who are working to counteract Huntington's predictions about clashes across civilization divides. Amongst them are an Imam and Pastor from Nigeria who are part of that trust building network. They were fighters on both sides of a divide who decided to make the courageous step to reach out and build peace together in their region Nigeria. They have also taken their trust building methodology to Kenya and more recently to Chad to continue to give hope that a sustainable peace can be built in communities after conflict.

I think of friends in Lebanon across all the religious divides who even while their country was at war meet to form bonds of friendship 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. I also think of young people in Ukraine who initiated a programme called "healing the past" which aims to foster the development of a free and just society through encouraging healing of the past and reconciliation at the levels of individuals, communities and nations of Eastern Europe.

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 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 that is consistent with our culture and society. 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 would mean in terms of deliverables. Whatever the form of government I would want it to deliver security, plurality of views and freedom from fear; access to health and education; meaningful work and dignity to all. The litmus test of any society is whether it guarantees the same rights to minority groups in society as it does to the majority, to the educated and uneducated and to rich and poor.

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.

For me, this question of personal responsibility alongside government and institutions crystalized when I thought about the question of corruption. I used to get angry at the corruption I saw around me in society in the Middle East and I thought it was up to the politicians to change this. When I started work, 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 realised 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 stop corruption if I was not prepared to live honestly myself?

I decided to return the money to hospital. Little did I realise the chaos this caused as this was something that had never happened before and they did not know where to put the money or what to do with it. But because I returned this money they felt 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 return cheque from the hospital that was 100 times larger than the amount I had sent to them! It was a real lesson for me in the importance of personal honesty if I wanted a wider problem in society, like corruption, to be eradicated.

This is why I am especially pleased that "ethical leadership" is one of the focus areas of IofC international work. For a number of years we have held a series of conferences at our international conference centre in Switzerland on "Good governance and the factors contributing to human security" and we have also had a series of conferences on this theme in our other conference centre in India. These conferences bring together people from many parts of the world that want to build lasting systems of democracy and peace in countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and Americas so that they can share examples of practise and transferable skills, as well as encourage each other.

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 the younger generation with the skills and tools that will enable them to be future leaders in their societies. In Africa, we have had a leadership-training programme for young people that is aimed at equipping them to be the ethical leaders of the future as well as training them to be trust builders across divides in their own communities. Last year 11 people from 7 African countries took part in this training programme and then 8 of them joined other IofC trainers who delivered training for 200 peace mobilisers in South Sudan. While the current conflict in South Sudan has escalated it is my hope that these 200 peace mobilisers will be the reconciliation force in that country when the time is right.

Many of you will be aware of the Middle East is going through a period of turmoil and political transition. 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 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 a reality. I think of one young Egyptian friend who is conducting dialogues between young and old with difference political views. Another is working in deprived areas of Egypt to build housing, and deliver a community programme for underprivileged children.

IofC has developed a 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 communities. It has gone to 40 countries around the world. This year it has delivered a training programme in Iraq and also in 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 lives and our partnerships together – will build a world that is equitable and safe for all and where everyone has dignity and respect. That is the only lasting way to build a better future.

I hope you will allow me to make a few comments on Japan and its role in the world. This is my first visit to Japan. I am so impressed by your care for people and the respectful way you treat everyone with such dignity that makes everyone feel valued. This enables you to embrace diversity with ease. I know that the Muslim community in Japan is relatively new. I read in the Japanese Times yesterday that the 100,000 Muslims in Japan feel at ease to practise their faith in your midst. The article spoke about how Japan could show the west how to live with Islam. Japan is regarded as one of the powerhouses of the world and is hugely respected in the world. I hope that Japan will be visible and vocal in international affairs as it is important for the world to hear your views and perspectives. The new world order in international affairs can't happen without a vocal and visible Japan.

Without trust there can be no democracy. Without ethical leaders we won't have the 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 their conscience, act with integrity and moral values. This is the great hope for the future of each country and for the world.

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