

WFD 25TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE – WFD STRATEGY

Anniversaries are an opportunity for nostalgia. Let me begin by recalling four events from 1992.

First, former Yugoslavia. As a young desk officer in the Foreign Office I was part of the team that organised a conference on the former Yugoslavia. This followed the broadcast of images from prison camps in Serbia that shocked the world. The Western Balkans became a core part of my working life for the next four years.

Second, South Africa. In 1992, following negotiations between FW De Klerk and Nelson Mandela on the ending of apartheid, the National Party won an overwhelming majority in the South African elections. This result was a mandate for constitutional change and the election of the first multi-racial government two years later.

The third and fourth events were both here in Westminster. In parliament, Betty Boothroyd was elected as the first female Speaker of the House of Commons. And in the General Synod, the Church of England voted to admit women as priests.

The Westminster Foundation for Democracy was affected by all four of these events, and the policy issues that they raised. 25 years later, European integration, political and economic liberation in Africa, and the empowerment of women - continue to be part of our work.

I was appointed as Chief Executive of the Foundation in August 2014. I welcomed the chance to understand how Britain's long experience of building a democratic system could be useful with international partners. I expected to learn a lot about Britain's own institutions and the political stability that we had enjoyed for so long.

Well, three years is a long time in politics, and two referendums and two general elections later, there have been plenty of lessons for me about the never-ending task of renewing and reinforcing democracy.

My job now is to tell you about our new strategy. Strategies are, like democracies, also a never-ending task. As Clausewitz said, plans are nothing; planning is everything.

I won't go through the whole strategy but will instead mention six points about it.

The first point is that democracy is about values. That comes out in our choice of quotes at the beginning of the strategy – from Winston Churchill, Cyril Ramaphosa and Amartya Sen. Churchill's words are that, for all its faults, only democracy can prevent the abuse of power.

Ramaphosa says that it is only democracy that values every individual so that we each have the power to transform our own lives.

And it is Sen – the economist - that tells us that the time for democracy is now, not at some distant point when more economic progress has been made.

The second point is about our programmes. The main pillars of WFD's work in the past ten years have been political party support, working through sister parties in the UK, and parliamentary strengthening.

We started to introduce more flexibility in our 2015 strategy and the new strategy goes even further. We are expanding our programmes in a couple of ways – one is by including work with civil society on their interaction with the political system, and the other is by including work on electoral issues, building on our support for EU and OSCE election observation missions.

Sister party work will remain central to WFD since we believe that our unique structure is a prized asset. But we also want to do more multi-party work, and to combine elements from any of our programmes so that we tailor and adapt our work in ways that are most appropriate to the local context.

The third point is about inclusion. Inclusion is a fundamental issue in every country, whether it is about ethnicity, religion, or the rights of other minorities. The focus of the debate will shift in each country but the underlying issue is respect for the rights of every individual so that, as Cyril Ramaphosa says, each of us can transform our own lives.

Perhaps most importantly, every country, including ours, faces the challenge of ensuring that women have an equal political role. Until that happens, there will remain a serious flaw in our democracies. That is why WFD has made a step change in its work on women's political empowerment, which is now central to our vision of democratic strengthening.

The fourth point is about learning. One of the things that we have liked most about the 2015 strategy has been our research programme. One part of it is with Birmingham University, led by Prof Nic Cheeseman. Their dedicated WFD researcher, Susan Dodsworth, has already begun publishing material drawn from her analysis of WFD programmes.

In addition, a series of applied research projects led by our own staff has tackled issues such as the cost of politics, political parties in the MENA region, the contribution of parliaments to Goal 16 of the SDGs, and the experience of decentralisation.

The research programme has reinforced our view that only by investing in learning, through research, evaluation and other reviews, can we improve the quality of our work and the value to our partners. The new strategy will continue the research programme and refocus it to address new issues that are key to the success of our programmes.

The fifth point is about partnerships. Although we are ambitious, WFD will always be a niche player in the work to secure our vision of effective democratic systems across the world. But to be as effective as possible, we want to partner with others that work in a complementary way.

Some of these are British organisations, such as the UK Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the British Council, the BBC, the University of Birmingham and the Overseas Development Institute. But others are based elsewhere, such as the Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services or the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa.

I have already mentioned the NED but we also partner whenever possible with its sister organisations, NDI and IRI. And I am very proud to be on the Board of the European Partnership for Democracy, a coalition of European organisations committed to democracy support.

The sixth and final point is about reach. WFD has expanded significantly in the past three years. With 100 staff, offices in 27 countries and programmes in many more, we are having more impact than ever before. But we think there is more that we can do and we want our new strategy to be the launch pad for further programme work. We know that there is demand for this, not only in the parts of the world where we have been operating for longest – Europe and Africa – but also in Asia and Latin America.

Our new strategy is available for you to look at from today. But we will be listening carefully to the discussions at this conference and stand ready to adapt it to the comments that you make. It will be, as they say, a living document so that it can help WFD do the best possible job for our country in supporting democratic change wherever we can.

Let me end by thanking all of our partners, colleagues and friends that have been able to join us today, and those that are not here. I want to mention in particular our friends in the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the National Assembly of Wales and the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, who all contribute so much to WFD's work. Thank you.