

## Speech at the Iusy Festival 2000

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### Vox Populi - Is It Real

In his book, "The Lexus and the Olive Tree - Understanding Globalisation", Thomas Friedman says:

" Like all revolutions, globalisation involves a shift in power from one group to another. In most countries it involves a power shift from the state and its bureaucrats to the private sector and entrepreneurs." (p 274).

He argues that this victorious power bloc has designed its own particular suit of clothing to advance its interests - a " golden straitjacket" that is " the defining political - economic garment of the (the) globalisation era." (p 86).

" To fit into the Golden Straitjacket, " he writes,

" a country must either adopt, or be seen as moving towards, the following golden rules: making the private sector the primary engine of its economic growth, maintaining a low rate of inflation and price stability, shrinking the size of its state bureaucracy, maintaining as close to a balanced budget as possible, if not a surplus, eliminating and lowering tariffs on imported goods, removing restrictions on foreign investment, getting rid of quotas and domestic monopolies, increasing exports, privatising state- owned industries and utilities, deregulating capital markets, making its currency convertible, opening its industries, stock and bond markets to direct foreign ownership and investment, deregulating its economy to promote as much domestic competition as possible, eliminating government corruption, subsidies and kickbacks as much as possible, opening its banking and telecommunications systems to private ownership and competition, allowing its citizen to choose from an array of competing pension options and foreign-run pension and mutual funds. When you stitch all these pieces together you have the Golden Straitjacket.

" Unfortunately, this Golden Straitjacket is pretty much ' one size fits all '. So it pinches certain groups, squeezes other and keeps a society under pressure to constantly streamline its economic institutions and upgrade its performance...It is not always pretty or gentle or comfortable. But it's here and it's the only model on the rack this historical season.

" As your country puts on the Golden Straitjacket, two things tend to happen: your economy grows and your politics shrinks... On the political front, the Golden Straitjacket narrows the political and economic policy choices of those in power to relatively tight parameters." (p 86-7)

At this session of the Festival we are discussing the topic - " Building Democracy World Wide". I believe it is not necessary that we waste time by making a general call for democracy and arguing the merits of democratic systems of government .

I have entitled this intervention: " Vox populi - is it real?"

I believe that the question we should all ask ourselves is whether it is the vox populi - the voice of the people - that is the voice of God, or is it the voice of the market, that is the voice of God!

In the same book I have cited, Thomas Friedman quotes an Israeli political scientist, Yaron Ezrahi, as saying:

" Many will see (globalisation) as little more than a mask used by certain economic elites for taking away the voice of the individual citizen. That is why some argue that the globalisers in each society want to buy the media first, because they want to turn potentially aggrieved and assertive citizens into conforming consumers. Turning politics into a spectator sport is one of the subtle processes which supports globalisation. It converts or transforms the citizen from an actor to a spectator, with illusions of participation." (p 162)

By definition, tyranny constitutes the silencing of the voice of the people. Fundamental to the labour, social democratic, socialist and national liberation movements from their very inception, is the adherence to the view that the people must be their own liberators.

These movements have therefore always fought for democracy and, more than this, for the empowering of the people to represent their own interests through their political parties and through mass struggle.

All of us, but most certainly those of us who come from Africa, are very conscious of the importance that all tyrants attach to the demobilisation of the masses of the people.

At all times, these tyrants seek to incite, bribe or intimidate the people into a state of quiescence and submissiveness.

As the movement all of us present here represent, surely our task must be to encourage these masses, where they are oppressed, to rebellion, to assert the vision fundamental to all progressive movements that - the people shall govern!

The first suggestion I would therefore like to make to you as the progressive youth of the world is that you have to reaffirm this, that you remain committed to the task of the greatest possible mobilisation of the youth and the people as a whole to struggle for their own upliftment.

Together, we have to defeat the effort to demobilise the people, turning politics into a spectator sport and transforming the citizen from an actor to a spectator, with illusions of participation, to use Ezrahi's words.

Historically, because they represented vested interests, it was always the parties of the right that have been frightened by the spectre of the people acting in their own interests, as a conscious and organised force.

Accordingly, they have always sought to transform the citizen from an actor to a spectator, except in instances when they have succeeded to mobilise the people in support of causes that did not threaten such vested interests.

It would therefore be fundamentally wrong for the progressive movement to which we all belong, to surrender the role of revolutionaries during this period of globalisation, to the parties of the right.

This will happen if we fail to understand that it is both necessary and possible to harness this process of globalisation, including the revolution in information and biotechnology that is integral to this process, to serve the interests not of the minority but the majority of the people.

Among other things, we have to welcome the possibility created by modern information and communication technology for the citizen to enhance his or her capacity to inform independent opinions about the great variety of issues and events that impact on the life of the citizen.

Whether in government or not, we have to encourage all efforts targeted at ensuring better access by the citizen to what the system of governance is doing, to enhance transparency and accountability. This will improve the capacity of the citizen to intervene in the determination of what happens in his or her society,

refusing to be a spectator of a game played by entrepreneurs, professional politicians, media communicators and the so- called opinion-makers.

If the progressive movement positions itself as luddites relative to these objective historical processes, it will condemn itself to wither on the vine, embroiled in a hopeless rearguard struggle to draw on nutrients that have ceased to exist.

The struggle to build democracy world wide requires that we refuse to accept the concept of the shrinking of politics, and reaffirm the continued relevance of the concept - vox populi, vox del!

In this context, surely we should be concerned at the tendency towards the diminishing participation of the youth and the people in general in elections to choose their governments, including their local government representatives.

As progressive organisations, we cannot be satisfied that, where this happens, we get elected into government by a minority of the population, even if this represents a majority of those who bothered to vote.

Similarly, while supporting and actively encouraging the citizens to involve themselves in single- issue non-governmental organisations, we must also work to inspire these citizens to broaden their involvement to encompass all aspects of social development.

Clearly, we will not succeed to mobilise the people if our organisations, the organisations of the progressive movement, are weak.

Personally, I would be very interested to hear what your own assessment is, of the strength and viability of the youth organisations that are members of IUSY

It is commonly agreed, globally, that multi-party systems are central to the health of democracy. This precept recognises the critical importance of political parties to the objective of ensuring the involvement of the people in determining their own destiny.

In its World Development Report 1999/2000, entitled " Entering the 21st Century", the World Bank says:

" Democratic revolutions are often driven by a popular upsurge and the resurrection of civil society...Once democratic movements achieve their immediate goals, the civic energy that fuelled them often dissipates. This was the case in the democratic revolutions of Africa, Eastern Europe, and Russia. Political parties can help maintain a continuing link between civil society and government...Party systems thus improve legitimacy and governability by making the democratic process more inclusive, accessible, representative, and effective." (p 122)

Who, but the progressive movement, should set themselves the political task to ensure that the democratic process is inclusive, accessible, representative and effective.

Inevitably, this raises the issue of the professionalisation of politics.I am certain that it is clear to all of us that, even within the progressive movement, there is a tendency towards the formation of cadre of professional politicians.

The danger this poses is that this movement, whose strength and legitimacy lies in its capacity to represent the ordinary people, will only see these masses as voting cattle and our progressive parties as mere electoral machines.

As part of this process, the progressive movement will betray its role as a force for change and the leader of the offensive for the achievement of a better life for all.

Instead, because of the struggle by the professional politicians for positions of power, it will become a representative of rank opportunism, driven to act according to what opinion polls, focus groups, the media and single-issue campaigners say.

Democracy is about the exercise of political power by the people themselves. As the organised representative of these masses, the progressive movement cannot, on the basis that the market will decide these issues, as Friedman asserts, abandon the struggle for the all-round and sustained betterment of the lives of the people and the attainment of social justice.

Accordingly, we have to continue to treat the struggle against poverty, national and social exclusion and marginalisation as fundamental to the objectives of socialist movement.

The obverse of this is that democracy itself cannot survive if large numbers of people are driven to the margins of society because of poverty and underdevelopment.

The history of our own Continent demonstrates the point very clearly that the competition for very limited, and sometimes diminishing, finite resources very easily leads to the use of force to deny the people their democratic and human rights and to the monopolisation by a small elite that controls the state instruments of coercion, of such wealth as is generated.

The social democratic challenge of social exclusion and marginalisation, as part of the expression of its view about the socio-economic content of democracy, relates not only to those who are poor, including the disabled.

It must also relate to the important question of the emancipation of women and the achievement on a sustained basis of gender equality. No society can be considered to be truly democratic where the women are in manner which makes them less than equal to men.

The pursuit of the objective of prosperity for all therefore imposes an obligation on the social democratic movement in the developed countries to adopt as an inherent part of its programmes and struggle the achievement of such prosperity in the developing countries as well.

Historically, this movement has always defined itself as internationalist by nature. It was therefore ahead of all other political tendencies in recognising that even as early as the 19th century, the economy was developing in a manner that tended to unite the peoples across national boundaries.

The current process of globalisation should therefore further underline the critical importance of the strengthening of the internationalist posture of the social democratic movement.

This also relates directly to the challenge we all face not to relax our offensive against racism and xenophobia. European history as well as our own, speak very loudly of the fact that racism constitutes a direct threat to democracy itself and not merely the democratic and human rights of those who happen to be the victims of racism and xenophobia.

The struggle for democracy world wide is a struggle for the emancipation of human society from oppression, discrimination, poverty and ignorance and from the serious threat of the degradation of the environment.

It is self-evident that we cannot win this struggle unless we are organised to wage it, unless we have the theoretical framework to guide us in our work, unless we succeed to release the energy of the youth and the masses in all countries to act as their own liberators.

In his poem, "Question from a worker who reads", Brecht wrote:

"Who built Thebes of the seven gate?  
In the books you will find the names of kings.  
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?...  
The young Alexander conquered India.  
Was he alone?  
Ceasar beat the Gauls.  
Did he not have even a cook with him?  
Philip of Spain wept when his armada  
Went down. Was he the only one to weep?...  
Every page a victory.  
Who cooked the feast for the victors?  
Every ten years a great man.  
Who paid the bill?"

These question should not raise for us we know that without the working people who are both the architects and the defenders of democracy, our own Thebes of the seven gates will not be built.

Thank you