

One Nation – One People

*Some Notes
On A Current Issue*

by

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Introduction

I was a child of the late 1940s and the 1950s, when the world seemed still able to provide a great deal of wonderment that was not tied into electronics and gadgetry as it seems to be today; those forms of entertainment then remained a lifetime away. Even TV did not then exist in our house. Children and young people then had plenty of freedom to find ways of utilising their free time and, generally, that time was beneficially spent. Yes, in experimenting, you might fall into a bed of stinging nettles, but you would also find out the antidote for the sore rashes that suddenly arose on your body.

In the locality I was brought up in (and in a council house at that), there was full opportunity to explore what then amounted to a countryside within suburbia – bricks and cement were still far from covering up the acres of grassland, trees, streams and pools that existed nearby, on Billesley Common, Swanshurst Park and The Dingles in south Birmingham.

Later in life I was to discover that the author J. R. R. Tolkien lived part of his childhood close to the nearby Sarehole Mill in Birmingham, and I understand that his childhood experimentations there later contributed to his highly imaginative writings. Small wonder, therefore, that I was also imbued with that wonderment at what I found, although by then that suburbia was not what it was in Tolkien's day when the River Cole and its locality supported otters and other larger wild-life. But though the local wildlife in my day was not as plentiful as it must have been 50 or 100 years before, the skies and the trees were still full of birds – mainly sparrows and starlings, but also blackbirds and thrushes, and, of course, Mr. Robin. They mostly seem to have gone now.

As a teenager, I expanded my horizons to cycling the few miles to Earlswood Lakes and also explored the Stratford-on-Avon canal. A little later I branched out to places 20 miles or more distant. Yes, as a young teenager I was allowed to do those things; I did have one or two near misses on the road, but that was life.

In the UK it was the last days of Empire, and the first days of the Welfare State, and it was a time of austerity as the UK strove to rebuild in the aftermath of the Second World War. At school, writing was still done with pen dipped into an inkwell, and it was only when I reached the age of fourteen that I became among the first to use the

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new cheap, disposable, ball-point pens. And they even came with a choice of ink-colour; then, that was amazing! But the corollary of that development was the rise of ‘the disposable society’, for which society eventually found an antidote in organised re-cycling.

I now realise that in those days, I was a member of that band of people that were growing up into the Brave New World of television, jet aircraft and computers – and not least into the Nuclear Age. There was also the identification of the DNA structure and other incredible scientific discoveries.

All at once it seemed that the old world was disappearing in front of our eyes but, while new wonders were popping out of Research and Development, we still used slide-rules and log tables at school. Hand-held calculators and computers were still ten or more years away, but rapid social change was shortly to become the norm as the standard of living improved.

My family did not have a TV until 1955, and the Queen’s Coronation in 1953, televised in black and white (“natural colour” as one person has since described it), could only be seen by us at my aunt’s house across the road, in company with many other members of the extended family. My aunt excelled in her supply of sandwiches, cakes and tea that day. I also remember the news that same month, of Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tensing reaching Everest’s summit. But the news technology was still primitive and, relative to how news is now transmitted, it almost seems now that the news had come via bush telegraph!

My great-grandfather’s highly extreme pre-WW2 dictum that “the civilised world ends at Dover” seemed to be still something like the pervading prejudiced attitude among many in Britain in those days. Black and Asian people were hardly to be seen, and it seemed that the Church of England was still the essential mouthpiece of spiritual wisdom. Although the point did not occur to me in my earliest years, I later contemplated that the Church seemed to convey the impression that Christianity was somewhat divorced from other religions – that Jesus was, somehow, ‘western’ ... and was religion just for Sundays?

That period seemed much more innocent in character. But, as already intimated, there was something of a prejudiced air in respect of what opinions were held towards ‘foreigners’ and practitioners of other religions.

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However, before I was thirteen, I would lie on the back lawn in the blackness of night, looking up at the great expanse and depth of the sky and its myriad of stars. Mankind's seeming vulnerability hit home to me: 'What would happen if Earth collided with something big?'; 'Would the Earth suddenly stop one day?'; 'Would we all be thrown off?'

I then decided, rightly or wrongly, that the Earth had lived a very long time without these calamities taking place (at least, not recently), therefore arriving at the conclusion: 'Why fear now?'

What came to be more of a concern to me as my teenage years progressed was the state of mankind, who, even then, seemed unable to learn from two devastating World Wars. The Fifties was the time of the Cold War (the West versus the Soviet Union) and the threat of nuclear warfare, and major wars still persisted in Korea and Indo-China (Vietnam). I, at least, was able to breathe a sigh of relief as the two years' compulsory National Service in the armed forces was brought to an end two years before I reached the qualifying age of 18.

With the abandonment of National Service came the question, "Should it be replaced with something akin to a National Community Service?" The question was put on one side by the nation and deemed an unnecessary development, but, as we traversed the Sixties, there were indications then that society was losing its shape; individuality was showing feint signs of transcending the obligations to one another, and to society. Some of the actions by young people could be considered laudable, however – such as protests against the war in Vietnam. The late 1960s was a period of substantial political activity by young people, particularly highlighted by events in Paris and Prague in 1968, but the later generations became more and more involved in self-interest.

Over fifty years after the cancellation of National Service, there is again serious consideration being given to a National Community Service. The riots that took place in several major English cities in August 2011 (after some 25 years since there had previously been public disturbances at least as serious) raised the question that 'society' appeared to have lost its sense of moral obligation and inter-dependence.

However, these riots had come on the back of revelations over the previous two or three years concerning banking malpractice combined with excessive bonuses, and excessive (and sometimes

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illegal) expense claims by members of parliament. And professional footballers didn't seem to set a particularly good example either.

The (many) unemployed and disaffected youth were starting to vent their feelings by doing in their way what some privileged members of society seemed to be doing – taking and destroying what was not theirs. The thinking appeared to be, 'If they can get away with it then so can we.' Seeds of anarchy were being sewn.

It could be said that the people of the working classes always seem to have been expected to obey the law whilst those already wealthy have tried to get more for themselves by dubious means – and succeeding all too often. That seems to have been the case throughout history.

I am inspired to write this booklet as a result of my own upbringing and seeing and experiencing what I have in 67 years, but also because of two particular members of my own family who made a difference in the lives of their fellow workers. On my mother's side there was Joseph Smith, my 2 x great-grandfather, who, though a poorly paid man himself, gave his spare time and energy to create and manage a penny sickness club that eventually grew into the Wesleyan and General Insurance Society. The second – on my father's side – was my uncle, Percy Lerwill, who worked long hours to support his family yet contributed many more hours in voluntary social work for the needy in the days before the Welfare State came into being. He also had the great satisfaction of seeing his daughter become the first member of the family to enter university, in the late 1940s. It was then still the time when few people went to university, and very few of them were women.

This booklet is about the social dilemma Britain faces. At a time when ordinary working people are again under immense pressures in their ability to maintain themselves, this booklet proposes a 'glass half-full' look at possibilities instead of the more negative 'glass half-empty' view. It invites all members of British society to come together and accept that there are common values that we all share and that we should explore those values in a spirit of unity. After all, a house that is divided will surely fall.

I particularly hope that my small experience of working in inner-city deprived areas (in Birmingham and in Brixton, London), combined with my deep and unbiased involvement with various religious groups (particularly Christian, Muslim and Hindu)

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contributes to providing a clear perspective on the primary social issue existing in Britain – of how to better unify the people.

Working People In History

I feel that modern circumstances for workers essentially derive from the state of affairs that were imposed after the Norman conquest in 1066 – i.e. the feudal system. Before that – in Anglo-Saxon times – there seems to have been more of an egalitarian society, but after the Normans arrived there was definitely the imposition of a ‘we and they’ relationship between the various ranks of Norman lords and their vassals.

A ‘we and they’ attitude persists, perhaps, even to the present day. However, it has to be said that the trades union system has not entirely helped towards the removal of that condition. Recently, certain elements of the unions (but certainly not all) give too much impression that what they want to achieve is, simply, power – and often at the cost of the nation and to other workers.

But the rise of the trades unions – in their earlier forms – was entirely beneficial and necessary for the well-being of the worker. The governing and wealthy classes, having imposed by stealth the system of enclosures in the countryside, also – almost in parallel – invested in industry and the Industrial Revolution. The enclosures came to exploit the farm workers by depriving them of grazing rights and lowering their wages.

William Cobbett described his John Plodpole with “his handful of fire and his farthing or half-farthing rushlight”. Parson Hawker, living in Morwenstow in North Cornwall around 1834, wrote: “they are crushed down, my poor people, ground down with poverty, with a wretched wage”.

The conditions also drove people away from the land, and if they did not emigrate then they went into the newly burgeoning towns and cities to find work and sustenance to support themselves and their families. There, the factory owners usually put the workers into conditions of danger and often for pitiful wages. The homes of the workers’ families were also so poor and cramped that disease was often rampant. There were no insurance nor pension facilities. All too often, death came at an early age with consequent burial in a pauper’s grave. And there was the dreaded threat of the workhouse.

A Croydon man, Harry Moncrieff, wrote a book called “Roots of Labour” that was published in 1990. He came to our house and gave

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a copy of his book to my wife when we were living in that locality, in December, 1994. Only the following month, this caring man very suddenly and sadly died.

His book is something of a bible to me as it warmly traces the history of the modern working man and provides a deep insight into the days of the mid 19th century and since and of how man came to establish his rights against the forces of exploitation.

The late Lord Callaghan of Cardiff ('Jim' Callaghan to his friends), the former Labour prime minister, wrote a foreword to the book. In this he wrote:

The end of the nineteenth century saw a great outpouring of enthusiasm, faith and energy that inspired ordinary men and women to deeds that up until then had seemed beyond their power. They removed the taint of the workhouse from children; they understood through their organisation of the 1889 Dock Strike, that they could win their own battles against a heartless exploitation, they aroused an unrepresentative Parliament to the iniquities and indecency of unemployment.

Harry Moncrieff wrote (in his book):

Compassion and exploitation express two opposite characteristics within the nature of man. Within the nature of all men and so of all nations.

Exploitation is not the prerogative of governments. An employer can exploit his workers. Workers can exploit their employer. Husband and wife can exploit each other. It is the root of industrial, social and marital breakdown and war.

He goes on:

Exploitation is demanding without giving.

Compassion is giving without demanding.

Exploitation creates division and conflict.

Compassion can build a new world.

Compassion – I suggest – reflects man's true state. The use of exploitation, however, will maintain the user of that artifice in an animal state.

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I only see far-reaching improvement in society coming about by application of compassion *through* the intellect. For too long it appears to me that the world (particularly the western world) has considered that the intellect should be the ruling force. The problem with intellect when used in isolation is that an issue goes through prolonged debate before some kind of resolution is arrived at – and the final resolution very often omits commonsense issues. Hence why lawyers can find ‘holes’ in the law. University education is accepted as being the stuff of how improvements can be achieved in society – which, indeed, it could fulfil that purpose if only the heart were to be listened to more often.

Well, though I can happily listen to someone like Michael Sandel plough his way through the Moral Philosophy maze, his well-meaning approach does not seem to get to core issues – which are all about mankind and his spiritual condition. As far as I am aware, Sandel does not bring the spiritual condition into play at all in his meanderings – he is content to tackle all issues as though they are capable of being solved through the intellect.

I would suggest that since the Age of Reason came into effect, the western world has got unstuck over and over again because of its concentration on ‘solution through the intellect’. Intellect by itself has rejected the notion of spirituality being an active ingredient in cognitive processes. The western world is floundering – mesmerised by its own cleverness. We only have to look at the state of the world – mostly now built or being re-built on the foundation of western materialism – to see the flaws and the cracks.

Harry Moncrieff’s small book is quite a different approach and may not appeal to many because of its simplicity. He describes the work of four men “who understood and cared about the deprivation suffered by millions of men, women and children in their day”. These four applied what they had learnt through personal suffering and endeavour and, between 1890 and 1910, they built a workers’ movement that changed the balance of society in Britain. They, by applying the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as preached by John Wesley (particularly through the example of the Good Samaritan), created the true roots of the British Labour Party.

These men did not lack intellect – but they knew the importance of compassion. They were:

Will Crooks (who demonstrated care of the poor);

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Ben Tillett (in the mobilising of a whole community);

Robert Blatchford (who, through his writings, maintained the hope of a new society);

Keir Hardie (by rousing men and women to make democracy work).

One appealing trait of these men is that they, when addressing the public by speech or in writing, did not appeal to the men's material interests, but to their self-respect. Moncrieff wrote:

So a socialist speaker in those days at a mass meeting would expose and condemn the evil of the exploitation of children in the factories, and in the same speech expose and condemn the evils of drunkenness that led to the exploitation of children in the home. Both were wrong, and an employer or father stood in both cases condemned and must change their ways. The delegates were tough self-educated men who knew hardship and privation; many knew what it meant to share with their neighbour their last loaf of bread.

It was this ability to care and share that convinced them that humanity was capable of building a new society. They had founded a moral movement.

Unfortunately, the British Labour Party of recent years – over 100 years since the founding of that party – has in its recent government joined in the acceptance of self-interest as being an acceptable standard. The Labour Party effectively accepted the Thatcher politics of the 1980s – that of improving the lot of everyone in society by sharing in the 'filter down effect'. Unfortunately, those politics are flawed: they depend on (1) economic development being the panacea for all ills, and (2) an approach that assumes that those in the higher economic classes set the right example and work within moral limits.

In any case, economic development is not an endless facility; the resources of the planet are not endless and populations are burgeoning at the expense of wildlife. If we were to look closely at what is happening to the rest of the world after years of globalisation and economic development, we can see the same dark forces of exploitation and the situation of 'haves' and 'have nots' in other societies that have affected our own society to detrimental effect. An additional concern is that corruption probably exists to a much greater degree in certain other countries, but it also nearly became

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acceptable in Britain in the last few years. Corruption can only exacerbate problems, in developing and developed countries.

Economics, by itself, cannot provide the rule book. Sandel quite rightly states that economic planning and execution has to be balanced by a moral code, but that moral code must take compassion into account. Nation must speak unto nation by appealing to the self-respect of the other – as did the founding fathers of the British Labour Party to the people of Britain.

Compassion, not exploitation, must be key. And the same rule must apply to the British government when dealing with social unrest amongst our own people.

Working People in Britain Today

Virtually all of the social ills that existed in Britain over 100 years ago no longer exist, yet some of the underlying moral issues do still exist, particularly the matter of ‘self first’ which by itself can undermine society. After the Second World War, those returning from the fighting – tired of pre-war unemployment and being exploited as cannon fodder in two World Wars – wanted a new society, and overwhelmingly voted for the Labour Party as the government of the day.

Significantly, the Conservative Party made a note of the swing in the nation’s political viewpoint in 1945 and subsequently adopted policies that were more orientated towards ‘one nation’. Those policies appear to have become destabilised in the 1980s when Margaret Thatcher alleged that society no longer existed.

Having stated in 1984 that she recognised the existence of society:

I came to office with one deliberate intent: to change Britain from a dependent to a self-reliant society — from a give-it-to-me, to a do-it-yourself nation. A get-up-and-go, instead of a sit-back-and-wait-for-it Britain.

Mrs. Thatcher then stated, in 1987: “There is no such thing as society.” However, that statement was qualified as follows:

There is [a] living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate.

This statement could be construed as giving licence to self-interest albeit that she referred to the charitable instinct in man, which was what the poor relied upon in the nineteenth century. Social upliftment then depended on individual action by men like the Unitarian Joseph Chamberlain (father of later prime minister Neville) whose leadership brought about the eradication of slum conditions (at least temporarily) and the re-building of Birmingham.

Unfortunately that instinct was not prevalent then in sufficient force, which is effectively how the Labour Party came into being. Despite Mrs. Thatcher’s insistence, there was nothing in 1987 that

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gave confidence to the notion that citizens should fall back on individual and/or corporate charity as an alternative to a fair state system.

Society does exist; we are indelibly inter-linked within it. The rich may decide to live behind barred gates in the city or in a purpose-built house in the countryside, but the great majority of the rest of the nation does not have that choice. Indeed, I suspect that the great majority would not want that choice as they find, amazingly enough, that co-mingling with their fellows can be quite rewarding.

In my view, it is only by the mandatory imposition of a fixed and equitable portion of one's income towards the needs of the poor, elderly and infirm that can enable a society to even begin to claim itself as being civilised. The issue cannot be left to the whim of individuals and whether or not their consciences decide to play a part – particularly those who have obtained a very sizeable bank balance, even though they may have worked for it. The rich may believe that the poor are jealous of their wealth, but it is not a question of jealousy but what is fair and equitable according to what opportunities life has presented to each one of us.

Many people are simply prevented – for all manner of reasons that are usually out of their hands – from being able to attain wealth. And many of those would enter the winter of their lives without the requisite support if it were not for the help offered by a benign society (or state).

When we die we are as when we were born – without possessions. Rich and poor alike.

But today's British society is an amalgam of various groups, many of whom were not visible more than sixty years ago. The integration of many overseas people of different belief systems has occasionally proved to be testing and has given rise to situations that might euphemistically be described as showing extreme stress – essentially in inner city areas. However, the common belief by people of those different belief systems in the essential virtue of man very often shows signs of triumph over adversity in those inner city areas. The essence of each of their diverse belief systems (towards peace) indicates their binding strength and therefore their value in building a peacefully sustainable society.

When I was a boy, the church (reflected through several major and a few minor sects) had a considerable bearing on the morality of

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people in Britain. Judaism was also well represented but, again, through various sects. Today, many of those born in Christian families have departed from formal religion and adapted to other philosophies, but we now also have significant numbers of members of other religions – Muslims (of several sects, though one is the predominant), Hindus (who do not profess a system of sects but a varied, almost personal, approach to their faith), Sikhs, and a number of small groups of other persuasions, including Bahai and Parsi.

The picture of British society is therefore comprehensively different to that which existed more than 100 years ago, but some of the challenges are very similar.

Many Philosophies

Traversing the streets of London, Birmingham and other places, I am very conscious of changes that have taken place to the kind of society that existed when I was a boy.

Materially, of course, times have changed considerably; in the 1950s cars and planes were not seen anywhere near to the extent that they are seen now, and electronic gadgetry is now to be found in great profusion. But these are just a few examples of superficial changes; the profound changes are in the ways in which we treat ourselves – the old western culture has effectively given up smoking but its people now tend to under-exercise and over-eat – and now, in the cities and towns, we see plentiful evidence of the arrival of what were once purely Asian religions and cultures.

Thankfully, the days of racial prejudice in this country are largely well behind us, but as a project supervisor in a large manufacturing company in Coventry in the early 1970s, I was involved in the recruitment of much-needed technical staff and interviewed a Sikh who had highly commendable qualifications and experience. I was keen to take him on, but there were several debates at management level as to whether this was a wise thing to do – he would have been the first non-white person to be recruited in that department. Thankfully, reason prevailed and he came to join my team – he proved to be one of the best people I had.

That battle has been largely fought and reasonableness has won in this respect.

The Sikh was also one of my first face-to-face encounters with a member of an Asian community and I was impressed with his dignity and professionalism. He was a thoroughly fine ambassador for people of his culture and faith and he opened my eyes. I had once thought there might be some reasonable basis for racial prejudice, but although I was never imbued with that attitude, my meeting him completely removed such thoughts from my mind.

Only five years later and after living in a semi-rural area for nearly ten years, I was living and working in London. I was suddenly projected into the middle of what was already called (in the middle-70s) ‘the melting pot’. Within a short space of time I was not only mingling with all kinds of overseas visitors at the Wimbledon YMCA

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(members of 36 nations were living there, representing every significant religious faith), but I was also voluntarily involved with the YMCA and worked for nearly a year in a Lambeth Community Relations Council project in Brixton. Goat curry became a regular dietary faire during my time there!

Largely as a result of my involvement at the YMCA, I soon became closely entwined with the wider Muslim community – i.e. of all sects. Several individuals became friends and I learnt a considerable amount about the ancient and modern beliefs and practises of all those sects and beliefs, whether Sunni, Shia, Ahmadiyya or Sufi. Since those days (more than 25 years ago), I became married to a Hindu lady and have since learnt at least as much about Hindu beliefs and practises, *especially* the underlying philosophy of these people of (or descended from) the sub-continent of India.

As my wife originates from Malaysia, I have over the years come to know something about social integration issues within that country as it primarily consists of a society of Muslims and Buddhists, but also Hindus, Sikhs and Christians in significant numbers, and some Bahai.

Today, my wife and I live within mainly a gentle and brotherly Sunni Muslim community in Birmingham.

My predominant experience of Asian peoples is one of love and concern for everyone – without (apparently) any prejudice. One hears of religious conflict elsewhere in the world – and, indeed, in some parts of Britain – but my experience has been utterly peaceful and brotherly, and I believe I have experienced the natural way of these people. Very creditably, the recent riots in the Winson Green area of Birmingham seem only to have brought the diverse Asian communities even closer together.

The only prejudice I have encountered is from members of the practising Christian community who 30 years ago seemed to know very little about what they were prejudiced about or even the origins of their own religion. Matters have improved considerably over recent decades but there is still a tendency for a significant number of them to think that Christianity is in some way superior. But Christianity is not alone in that attitude – it is simply that as Christianity is the host religion of the country it should perhaps set a better example.

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With the Asian community in Britain growing in size, and at a considerably higher birth-rate than other groups, perhaps now is the time to evaluate the core values of all faiths to find the commonality from which the basis of a new sense of community can be developed; a community based on tolerance and much more fairness than has been exhibited over these last few decades.

There is nothing to be scared about in Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism, nor any other Asian religious faith. They are simply different ways that have a unity of purpose, based on peace. They are compatible. The religion of Jesus is, essentially, no different. And the people that experience these faiths in their communities in Britain know full well that commonality exists – there is a sound foundation for the integration of society *and for the promulgation of meaningful values.*

The Essence of all Religion is the Same

A common theme exists in all religions in how to treat others. For example:



Jewish Faith:

Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.



Christianity:

All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.



Islam:

No one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.



Sikh Faith:

As thou deemest thyself, so deem others.



Hinduism:

Men gifted with intelligence and purified souls should always treat others as they themselves wish to be treated.



Buddhism:

In five ways should a clansman minister to his friends and familiars: by generosity, courtesy, and benevolence, by treating them as he treats himself, and by being as good as his word.

What Works

There is no excuse for rioting, but there are frustrations underlying a rioter's acts that can be explained. To take the case of the recent demonstration by (essentially) young people, they regard themselves as a 'no hope' generation – the world (to them) has left them without hope and yet they have seen respected members of society (bankers, M.P.s etc.) effectively cheat the country for their own advantage. And the general tone of society generated over the last 20 years is that everyone should be out for themselves.

The rioter's simple thinking is that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor. Where is the example being set in society that society should expect the rioter to follow the law?

And there are other issues. Do governments really think that the tower block and multi-storey social housing that has housed many residents over the last 60 or more years is really the type of housing that people should be brought up in? Has it not been observed that many problems occur on these estates?

And then the present government comes in with its cuts which adversely affect the poorest 10% in the country, with the roll-on affect being the closure of various establishments and services that have helped to provide a safety valve in the past.

What works? Only a compassionate government – one that works for integration towards One Nation: for Unity. But anything that is coordinated must be based on a real foundation – on rock – for it to work. *For an implementation of appropriate values to be achieved, all the major religious faiths and philosophies must be consulted.*

Harold Pinter said (in his 2005 Nobel Prize speech):

I believe that despite the enormous odds which exist, unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens, to define the real truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all.

It is in fact mandatory.