

Speech: Lord Ahmad Speech at the Governing Council of the Community of Democracies

I am particularly delighted that I am joined by my good friend and colleague from the Cabinet Office, Chloe Smith and I look forward to her intervention. I thank you Chloe for joining us here at the FCO, it is as I said this morning, a very busy time over the road in Westminster – indeed, as Chloe informed me, the Prime Minister is currently on her feet – so the fact that Chloe is here we are extremely grateful.

As said, by Richard, we are joined by Anthony Smith, from the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Having two Smiths either side of me makes me a bit of a sandwich I suppose – I am the filling in the middle here, having such expertise either side of me.

Of course, we talked earlier this morning about democracy and it does not take a single form; indeed, as I am sure we have heard today from some of the representatives. I am glad that you heard from the Maldives Foreign Minister, who I met earlier, about their journey to democracy. Indeed, one of the areas they are keen to do, is also re-join the Commonwealth, which as the Minister of the Commonwealth I particularly welcome.

But as we embark on these journeys, as I said indeed our own journey in the United Kingdom – the actual speed of change is different and the results may differ. But, one true fact is that every true democracy has at their heart and their interest the people. People make democracies tick; it is not just about, as we have seen, giving people the vote – it is also about the process that goes behind it; in terms of education, it is about being informed, being enabled.

I am sure many of us remember that famous scene of the first election – I certainly do – in South Africa, where people queued for hours, just to cast their vote. I am mindful of the fact that there are places in the world, such as Australia, where my wife grew up and even now as an Australian national, if she doesn't cast her vote, albeit by post, she gets fined – so there are different ways of encouraging participation.

But in essence, it comes back to the idea of people and ensuring people are fully engaged and that we facilitate that engagement.

Providing an open space for debate, the ability to question and challenge – and yes, our democracy is reflective of that. It is often said that the British Parliament is quite adversarial, I mean literally we are opposite each other being challenged. But the fact is, it provides that level of accountability.

As I mentioned this morning, the importance of the freedom of press,

sometimes they are critical, quite often they are critical of governments and hold us to the account. But this is part and parcel of the free press which defines a flourishing democracy.

It is no coincidence that where societies enjoy participative democracy, where people are free in an open environment, security and prosperity tend to follow very quickly and are part and parcel what defines that particular country or society.

However, when we look at different comparative democracies there are still those that feel their voices are not heard. This is a challenge we have and Chloe has been very close to that. I remember one of my early days in Parliament, in 2011, looking at the reform of our own electoral system – different electoral systems are perceived as being more fair than the next. So again, democracies can be very different – proportional representation is often said that that way all people are heard; but does that mean that those voices, perhaps who are at the fringes also then gain greater voices in public space – that is a challenge that all democracies face.

Last year, in this respect, the UK held its inaugural, the first ever National Democracy Week. The aim was to increase participation from those most under-represented in this country. Chloe, I'm sure, will talk more to this, and show how the UK is trying to tackle the real challenge of democratic participation; encouraging more people to engage.

For my part, as a Minister of State at the Foreign Office, I can tell you that promoting and strengthening democracy is a key priority, and indeed it figures as a key part of my work as the Human Rights Minister.

We support a wide range of democracy-building initiatives, just to give you a few examples;

- funding NGOs that increase citizen participation,
- promoting the inclusion of marginalised groups,
- providing legal training for legal professionals around the world,
- promoting freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly
- strengthening political parties and parliaments, and
- supporting free and fair elections.

One of the areas that was discussed, between the Foreign Minister and myself, was the elections that are taking place – the parliamentary elections – that there will be election observers and how we work within different observer bodies to ensure that elections are fair.

However, there are many things that limit democracy. For example, you can have a democracy, but through legislation, through the constitution, certain communities are marginalised – they are not allowed to participate. Internet shutdowns – we have seen this recently as well as a means to clamp down on challenge to the government. Out-dated restrictions on women – I mentioned before that 100 years ago women did not have the right to the vote here. But the fact is that there are still places around the world that restrict a woman's ability to go out and simply cast her vote and chose her elected

representative. And indeed women's participation in parliament themselves.

We often talk of countries where there have been challenges and conflicts, but I always see things in a very positive light, and as Minister for the Commonwealth I have been current for example in Rwanda – and whilst challenges remain, if you look at the Rwandan parliament, I think it is about 66% of the Rwandan parliament are now women. So representative democracy, in its truest sense, does take place, and sometimes it is not by the oldest democracy, it is by those who are seeking to effect change in a different way. This goes back to my earlier point about how democracies take route and the speed in which they take route.

The UK Government also funds the Westminster Foundation for Democracy – and I am delighted to be joined by Anthony and he will certainly explain more about what they are doing to encourage greater levels of democracy amongst marginalised groups; a greater level of democratic participation amongst women and of course young people. But first, before asking Anthony to give his contribution – as I said I am delighted to be joined her on the panel by Chloe Smith. Chloe and I knew each other before we both came into parliament. So, I am delighted to have her here as both a friend, but also in her role as Minister for the Constitution – Chloe over to you.