

Pessimistic Society Assembly

I would like to speak this morning on some thoughts (some of which are prompted by The Book of Life website) on what is the best way to approach running a country. Perhaps controversially, I would like to suggest that pessimism, which is a tendency to see the worst aspect of things or believe that the worst will happen, is our best guide. You might disagree. Let me put the case. Perhaps a good jumping off point on the topic is a man who has made the opposite of pessimism - wild optimism - the basis for his presidency. I don't want to bang on about Donald Trump too much. I'm aware that he has featured in a number of assemblies and so this one will, unless something truly extraordinary happens, be the last mention of the incumbent President for a while. But no one could call him and his attitude to his presidency pessimistic.

He is full of rage and doubts about the actions of others, but his approach to his own governance is characterised by sunny optimism. Let me offer two examples.

To start us off, here is a quotation on the proposed wall along the Mexican border. Trump said, "I will build a great wall — and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me — and I'll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words."

Then there is this: 'We are going to win. We're going to win so much. We going to win at trade, we are going to win at the border. We are going to win so much, you're going to be so sick and tired of winning, you're going to come to me and go "Please, please, we can't win any more. You will say, 'Please, Mr Pres, we beg you Sir, we don't want to win any more. It's too much. It's not fair to everybody else.'

And I'm going to say, 'I'm sorry, but we are going to keep winning, winning, winning. We're going to make America great again.'

Clearly, Donald Trump is an optimist regarding his own capacity to govern. Our own government is equally positive in its approach to the coming negotiations to leave the EU. There might be many in this Hall who would think it obvious that a good society would be one in which a majority of people – as Donald Trump does - hold optimistic views about themselves, their fellow citizens and their prospects for their collective futures.

However, I would like to suggest this morning that quite the opposite is true: pessimism rather than optimism is a key ingredient for the maintenance of any good society.

At the core of pessimism is the idea that *everyone, however outwardly normal, is severely flawed*: short-term, blinkered, vengeful, sentimental and prone to reckless anger, fear, delusion and passion.

From an acceptance of this dark starting-point, there can flow political principles that together will make for a successful, calm and reasonable society. Let's consider a few:

In a society founded upon pessimism, rather boring and steady politicians are be the norm. No one believes the wild promises of crazy idealistic leaders. The pessimistic voters just don't

trust in easy, rapid solutions to any of the nation's major problems. Extreme promises at election time are discounted with a wry, dismissive shrug. No, of course we won't have £340 million a week to spend on the NHS.

Because pessimists know just how flawed any one individual can be, the ideal pessimistic society relies upon the rule of law and strong, slow-moving, independent institutions that prevent too much power from ever falling into the hands of a single person. Furthermore, the law and these institutions would be protected from violent changes in public opinion, whipped up by partisan newspapers – public opinion which, pessimistically, is seen as being vulnerable to hysteria and overreaction.

In the ideal pessimistic society, we won't single out any group or class of people, such as refugees or bankers, for blame. Our troubles, the electorate will sadly conclude, are caused mainly by big impersonal, historical forces – they are certainly not caused by a few people who are easy to target and hate.

Because they assume that it's natural for people to have rather dangerous appetites and desires, the citizens of a pessimistic society willingly put quite a lot of social restraints on themselves. They will define freedom not as the ability to do whatever they want at any point, but as the liberty to act in accordance with their wisest, most reasonable selves (which only appear every now and then). They accept social rules as the natural price for limiting their own self-destructive tendencies.

Nor do pessimistic societies have much time for celebrity culture, fashion and show biz, for they are pretty sure that no-one deserves to be idolised: the people know that from close up, we're all a bit of a mess. No more *Grazia* or *Hello* magazines.

A properly pessimistic society takes the trouble to invest in education - the education system would be broad, ambitious and very well resourced; the assumption is that every young person needs a huge amount of structured, targeted help in order to cope with life's challenges ahead.

In optimistic societies, there are constant claims that everyone can be exceptional and, one day, awe-inspiringly successful: The American Dream. The rewards of life are therefore geared towards those who make it to the top. The best restaurants are superb, the private hospitals are outstanding, the most expensive schools magnificent, the richest residential areas delightful, the taxes for the rich very low. But, rather foolishly, optimistic societies forget that, inevitably, most people are actually not going to be anywhere near successful enough to enjoy those benefits.

So in the pessimistic society, the apparently negative assumption that most people will have ordinary lives in which they will not enjoy incredible success has a positive outcome. It means that the goal of government is to make an average life (that is, the life most people will actually lead) as attractive as possible. Public housing, state schools, public hospitals and public transportation would all be superb, because it's assumed that almost everyone is going to be relying on them.

By following such pessimistic principles, the paradoxical outcome will be a society where there will actually be rather a lot to be cheerful about – though, of course, the wary, gloomy and wise citizenry would never quite dare to put it like that.

Sadly, it doesn't sound much like our society today. In fact, it is the opposite. Nor does it seem within the grasp of the wildly optimistic and already over-reaching new President.

My rather paradoxical and rather wry challenge to you this morning is to do all that you can to become the politician, public servant, business leader and voter who puts these wise, pessimistic, principles to work. I would like you to nobly and tirelessly set aside your optimism, working day and night to create a new (albeit pessimistic) utopia – but do keep smiling as you do it.