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OVERCOMING DISCONNECT

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by

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The greatest gift you have given me today is the opportunity of seeing again one of my most esteemed and dear friends, Lord Hurd. I also see in front of me Lord James Craig, who is responsible for me delivering my speech in English out of fear that he would correct me if I delivered it in Arabic.

Dr Nizami, the Director of the Centre, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here today. T. E. Lawrence, who attended Jesus College here at Oxford, is rumoured to have made the claim that he read every book in the library of that college. Notwithstanding my great appreciation for the oldest English-language institute of learning, I do not intend to verify the validity of that claim, as it could take me the rest of the week to complete the feat. But seriously, I am very pleased to be here among you today, and to engage in what I hope will be a candid, reciprocal discourse.

With your kind permission, I am going to claim the right to change the topic of my presentation today. The subject matter that I shall talk about is the current disconnect in political philosophy between the countries of the Arab and Islamic world and those of the Western hemisphere. Perhaps together we shall be able to clear the air of certain misconceptions and misapprehensions.

Yesterday, I spoke to the Saudi–British Business Forum, where I advanced the notion that the uniqueness of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom, within their respective regions and in the world, should impose upon them a sense of duty and dedication to work closely to address the problems facing the international community today.

The uniqueness of the United Kingdom rests in its being a nation of laws that has spread its cultural values throughout its once extensive Empire, and still enjoys a prominent position in world affairs. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the holy land where the message of Islam was revealed, where the two holy mosques are located, and where millions of Muslims travel every year to perform the pilgrimage and *umrah*. As such, Saudi Arabia is thrust towards assuming a position of influence and authority to maintain the moral tradition and the purity of Islam.

If you permit me, I shall hazard to suggest a different interpretation of the concepts of Orientalism and Occidentalism that kept us apart for so long. These are perceptions that cannot be changed by wishful thinking. Kipling, in his famous dictum, ‘East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,’ reflected the prevailing view of the time. It certainly can not be valid in today’s world. The values of East and West are continually juxtaposed. They provide therefore a comparative mechanism by which each society can look at itself in the other’s mirror in what I would call an ethical system of checks and balances—so that when the balance is tipped one way in one part, it can be quickly readjusted by the other.

One misapprehension that obstructs cooperation between us is the claim that Islam is not compatible with the prevailing Western view of human rights. There is absolutely no question that Islam recognizes the concept of human rights and in so doing preceded Magna Carta by some six hundred years.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a party to and was instrumental in the formulation of the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights. In my opinion the Declaration succinctly codified the Islamic view of human rights. It declares in Article 1 that 'all men are equal in terms of basic human dignity and basic obligations and responsibilities, without any discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, language, sex, religious belief, political affiliation, social status or other considerations.' It states in Article 2, 'life is a God-given gift and the right to life is guaranteed to every human being. It is the duty of individuals, societies and states to protect this right from any violation.'

It is obvious that we do not live in a perfect world, and it is possible that the Declaration addresses itself to such a perfect world. But the problem of what is and what ought to be is at the core of any society. The disconnect between our different societies' political philosophies can be measured by how close in application a system of values is in reality to what it ideally ought to be; it goes without saying that the closer these values are to the idyllic state, the better the society is. The disconnect is further complicated as we are not using the same language to express the same concept.

One of the greatest contributions to systems of modern thought was the British critical analysis of philosophical propositions, and by extension value statements, as expressed by the influential philosophers of the twentieth century A. J. Ayer and Ludwig Wittgenstein, who emphasized linguistic analysis, precision, and clarity. If we are to understand each other, especially when using abstract terms, we must have uniform agreement on the definition and appropriate usage of these terms. Until now, there remained a difference of interpretation as to what constitutes a uniformity of application of certain rights and processes such as human rights, democracy, liberty, and freedom of expression, amongst others.

Nowadays, however, we speak of these concepts with a lack of either historical context or present-day application. As we attempt to understand them today, human rights evolved from specific conditions to respond to various diversified requirements. While the serf tilling the land in medieval Europe quested for freedom, the complete freedom of the Bedouin nomad in the Arabian Desert had to be curbed in order not to infringe on the freedom of others by tribal wars and violence. As the author of American liberty, James Madison, once wrote (and I quote), 'In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.'

This leads to a further disconnect. There is the peculiar view in the West that democracy and human rights have always been immutable.

Allow me a brief historical digression. The power struggle in the United Kingdom between the branches of the government was a painful process, and it took the Reformation and a civil war to resolve the issue. Furthermore, the full emancipation of women did not come until the twentieth century. According to one historian, it was 'laughable' to assume that a woman could manage her financial affairs without the guidance of a man. I can't help but compare this to the concept adopted by Islam of the independence of women to handle their own wealth, which, by the way, has always been immutable.

Women's suffrage did not come about in the United Kingdom until the twentieth century and even then it had to be phased. The first stage allowed only women above the age of thirty to participate in elections, giving rise to rumours of a great conspiracy by men to prevent women from voting because they believed that no woman would admit to being older than thirty. As to the United States, it took a civil war and a generation of Supreme Court decisions for the Bill of Rights to be enforced.

I can go on and on in this vein, however my purpose is not to criticize, but to recite illuminating historical facts and to stress the point that successful political reform is an evolutionary process. There are many constitutions around the world that guarantee the application of human rights, but in practice some of these provisions are 'more honoured in the breach than the observance'. Allow me to quote a President of the United States: 'It is not the enactment, but the observance of laws, that creates the character of a nation.'

We in Saudi Arabia believe in the necessity of political reform, but it must be evolutionary and indigenous. To this end, we enacted the Basic Law of Governance, started a programme of National Dialogue, and increased the size of our Consultative Council, whose authority has been extended to review and promulgate legislation. As a result it became a member of the International Parliamentary Union.

This month, we commenced the process of electing municipal council members as a step to test the waters. The Saudi Minister of Islamic Affairs has declared that there is nothing in Islam that prohibits women from participating in elections. The smoothness of the electoral process led our Election Commissioner to announce that he is recommending that women participate in coming elections. I would not be surprised if they do so in the next round.

The role of Saudi women is changing rapidly; our educational reforms have created a new generation of highly educated and professionally trained Saudi women who are acquiring their rightful position in Saudi society. I am proud to mention here that this year we shall have women

working in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia for the first time.

We are doing our best in our reform. We must follow our own measured pace. One must not mistake caution for inaction. In fact, by hazarding the introduction of readily made imported reforms, we would only be allowing the detractors to claim that these reforms are not intended for the well-being of the people, but rather to allow for political domination by the West or the transformation of a highly devout and traditional society into a self-indulgent one.

If we accept the view of the West that the essence of human rights lies in their universality and uniform applicability, then any discrimination in the application of these rights would mean the absolute negation of that essence.

In this perspective the West's credibility in championing the cause of human rights in the Arab and Islamic world is demeaned by its disregard and neglect of the greatest human-rights crisis in the modern history of our region—the plight of the Palestinian people. Thus the double standard, practised for decades by the West, is a fundamental factor of disconnect in our political philosophies. In this context we are encouraged that Prime Minister Blair has taken the initiative in calling for the coming London conference. We hope this will go a long way to remove this perception.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom are in a unique position to resolve this disconnect and move forward to address the pressing issues facing the international community. We will not be able to discover remedies for all the woes that face us, but let us strive for a new model and a new order. In a recent book, *The Dragons of Expectation*, the Oxford alumnus Robert Conquest explains that, 'The new orders must be nonmilitant, non-expansionist, non-fanatical . . . with some level of internal tolerance, of a plural order, with some real prospect of settling into habit or tradition.' This is an achievable objective.

It is not too late, as your great poet Alfred Lord Tennyson said, 'to seek a newer world' and, 'strong in will, to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield'.

Citing verses 39 and 40 from Surat *An-Najm* in the holy Qur|an: 'That man can have nothing but what he strives for. That the fruit of his striving will soon come in sight'. I thank you very much and may the peace of God be upon you.