

**John Ralston Saul**  
**Speech at King's College London**  
**October 16, 2019**

Lord Geidt, President and Principal Ed Byrne. Fellow honorary degree recipients.  
Students, professors, friends.

There is one straight forward message to be conveyed to King's from this group of seven. We understand the honour you do us. And we want to express our gratitude - a simple form of gratitude, which somehow seems rarer as the rough and complex path of struggles grows longer behind us.

Thank you to King's, to its students, its professors and its leadership, from all of us.

When I think about our little pack of recipients, what stays with me is a strangely coherent mix of commitments - to freedom of expression, to human rights, to an honest eye on memory, on history, to the recognition of the role of women at the core of power, to the role of universities as a place of public service, to a broad idea of social wellbeing, in particular to physical and mental health as a human right, even in times of war and prolonged semi-war.

None of this is self-evident. None of this can ever be fully accomplished. These ambitions are always under threat.

When I think, for example, of freedom of expression, yes there are guarantees in bills, charters and declarations of rights. And this matters. It sets out the standards we expect. Provides tools for fighting back. But the reality is that each day we must get up and go out the door and struggle afresh for freedom of expression in every encounter, in every detail.

For myself, six years as President of PEN International, constantly moving around the world, negotiating with dictators, ministers of the interior, heads of police forces was bad enough. Forgive me for adding, that apart from being dangerous, murderous, there

is nothing more boring than a man with too much power - masters of the art of the monologue, minus the art. But witnessing the virtual indifference of our democratic leaders to the reality of free speech was - is - the really depressing part. Prince Zeid, you must have seen a lot of this.

And the same challenges are there with human rights, social fairness, physical and mental health. You don't get it or keep it because it is written down or guaranteed - although that is good. You get it and you keep it, because you demonstrate that you want it and you will fight for it.

The stories or narratives you at King's have chosen to honour today are largely about a conscious commitment to the principles of inclusion and justice, not to loyalty and law.

The job of a public university like King's, beyond its necessary belief in education, has to be the advancement of these public causes. There can be no understanding of knowledge and learning which - in the name of things like specialization and expertise, good though they may be - marginalizes either ethics or a commitment to the public good.

And speaking at least for myself, I believe that a rigorous and dominant public education system - from those first years of youth to the completion of doctorates - is central to all shared wellbeing. Fairness, balance and inclusion in any democracy is dependent on its public systems of education - its properly funded and transparently accessible public systems of education.

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How do we get from all of these principles to the reality we are now living? Yes, lots of wonderful things are happening to some of us, providing we don't fry or drown before we finish enjoying them.

We have to keep reminding ourselves that there are always overlapping and contradictory trends in the world. The important thing is to focus on the driving trends. Three are self evident.

We are at the end of a half century of dominance by one theoretically global economic ideology. This has left us with both spreading instability and rising anger among the majority of populations. As a result, the world is now shutting itself up - with an offensive-defensive state of mind - into five big regions, and entering into old fashioned regional struggles.

A crazy time for any country to set off on its own in a jolly little galleon.

And a crazy time to be obsessing over a mandate produced by a referendum. Referenda do not produce mandates. They produce permanent division or comfort authoritarian leadership. I am being a bit unkind. After all they are the perfect tool for deciding how many stripes to have in a flag, or whether to hold the olympics. But their political history is perfectly clear. As a Canadian - after two of these, designed specifically to break up the country - I can assure you that the outcome, whatever it is, can only be long term bitterness, families and friends permanently divided, generational burnout.

This isn't new. Here is what I wrote in 1995 in the *Unconscious Civilization*:

“The key to the referendum society is that it turns on a mystic evocation of past grievances, gathered together into a churning, aggravated spleen, where they are magnified and isolated from reality. Everything that is not a grievance disappears. This anger is then dovetailed into an heroic solution. Simple, absolute, salvatory. An answer.

The modern referendum, as Napoleon understood when he invented it, is the ideal consummation of the rational as irrational, of the anti-democratic posing as democracy. The complex issues of reality, which democracy can deal with in its own slow, indirect way, are swept aside by single, clear issues.” (113)

Second, the number of displaced people driven out of their homes or homelands by political and economic collapse, violence and climate is now almost 80 million. An unprecedented level. We seem to be on our way to 150 million, even 300 million by 2050. These are unmanageable numbers. They represent chaos.

They are the direct outcome of intentional policies driven from the west and of general inaction on all sides.

Third, there is that minor matter of self immolation and how bogged down we are in short term politics and economics. This is self interest as a suicidal act. The streets fill with citizens. Those with power dodge and weave, setting the slowest possible pace.

These three trends are interdependent. They will override everything else.

I speak here for myself. But, in different ways, I believe that all seven of us are trying to deal with the outcomes of these three forces.

And the work of King's, as a place of intentional thinking, cannot help but be shaped by the need to face them and to defeat them. Universities are one of the most powerful tools democracies have given themselves. We have to understand today's crisis, understand the power of these institutions and use that power.