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**P.A. CHRONO**

"A DEMOCRACY IS UNABLE ... "

BRYCE MEMORIAL LECTURE  
BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF NATO  
THE RT HON THE LORD CARRINGTON

AT

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"A DEMOCRACY IS UNABLE ..."

Optimists claim that higher education is a continuing process; and, if they are right, I should perhaps confess at the outset that it has taken me some fifty years of continuing process to get from Sandhurst to Somerville. I consider it a great honour to have arrived. Those of you who may be tempted to agree, but to think it at the same time rather too short a qualifying period, will not need my help in attributing or completing the part quotation I have taken as my title. But let me do so anyway, in case there are any fellow former bankers, soldiers or politicians in the audience.

De Tocqueville wrote in "Democracy in America":

"A democracy is unable to regulate the details of an important undertaking, to persevere in a design and to work out its execution in the face of serious obstacles. It cannot combine its measures with secrecy, and it will not await their consequences with patience."

And if you wonder what all that has to do with the Secretary General of NATO, I would ask you to reflect on what may be needed to reach agreement on major issues of defence policy and East-West relations in an alliance of sixteen sovereign nations, where there is no provision for majority voting and where all decisions are arrived at by consensus.

I shall come back to defence policy and East-West relations; but let me say a word or two first about democracy: because it is that, just as much as the territory of the member states, that the Alliance is there to defend.

The history of this century has been scarred - and nowhere more so than in Europe - by powerful figures for whom de Tocqueville's criticisms of democracy were a gross understatement. By leaders, whether of the extreme right or the extreme left, who were contemptuous of democracy; and who worked to replace it with political systems of differing detail and political colour, that have nevertheless always seemed to me to agree in their essentials. In their belief, for example, that the end justifies the means; in regarding self-determination as a once-and-for-all choice rather than a continuing right; and in concluding, the end having been defined and the choice having been made, that change should be condemned as either revolutionary or counter-revolutionary. And the advocates of change dealt with accordingly.

Looking at Europe today, my own view - call it political prejudice if you will - is that you will find such a system in force only in the Soviet Union; and in the countries of Eastern Europe to which it has been applied by varying forms of political and military pressure. The right wing dictatorships that contributed their share of the scars have disappeared. And what

we have instead is a Western Europe that may not have gone as far towards unity as some would wish; but that has nevertheless succeeded, not only in reconciling former enemies, but in establishing a framework that makes it inconceivable that war should once again break out between nations whose quarrels have accounted for so much of European history.

The contrast could not be more striking; and it is reinforced if you look at the economic, and I would say also the social, developments over the last forty years.

The democracies, in short, far from being unable, seem to have managed pretty well. Well enough, certainly, when one looks back and considers the alternatives. But is that well enough to dismiss de Tocqueville's criticisms as of no relevance to the future?

My overall answer would be an optimistic one, because I see no reason why the problems of the future should prove more intractable than those we have dealt with successfully in the past. But de Tocqueville's points can certainly not be dismissed as of no importance. Indeed, what he has to say about attention to detail, perseverance in the face of obstacles, secrecy and patience, has very much a modern ring. And I almost said a modern sting.

Let me take first the question of secrecy, but take it rather selectively - by which I mean that I hope to keep out of the debate about where we in the United Kingdom should strike the balance between what I would regard as two desirable objectives: that the citizen should know as much as possible about the policies that he or she has a democratic right to influence by democratic means; and that the government should have the means to protect information that it is in the national interest to protect.

People will, of course, disagree about the definition of these objectives, and about the weight to be given to each; and some may even argue that one or other should be disregarded, either as a general rule or in specific circumstances. But for my purposes this evening, I do not think that I need go beyond assuming that most people would agree that there is a balance to be struck; and that where the line is being drawn in Western countries is very different indeed from where it is being drawn in the East.

There are those who believe that that leaves us at a hopeless disadvantage in defence policy, and in dealings with the Soviet Union more generally. The examples they quote - of secrets revealed, negotiating positions given away and sensitive technology transferred without justification or quid pro quo - are real enough, even where they do not involve illegal activity on the part of hostile intelligence services. But there are also cases where such activity is very much involved, and the matter correspondingly more serious.

I certainly have no doubt that we should be both hard-headed in where we draw the line and zealous in policing it. But, subject to those important provisos, I would say that my greater concern is not that we in the West have too little secrecy, but that the Soviet Union has too much.

For all the historical arguments put forward - more, I would judge, as an explanation than an excuse - the fact is that Soviet secrecy is important as a current rather than as a historical phenomenon; and it is one that works in two main ways to dim the prospects for East-West relations. First, by cutting the Soviet people off from a proper understanding of what is going on in the West: an understanding without which they cannot judge whether the policies carried out in their name are or are not conducive to peace. And secondly, by cutting us off from the information we need to have confidence in Soviet intentions.

That first effect is going to be with us for some time. It is, of course, true that relatively easier travel, and Western radio and in some cases also television, are having an impact on Eastern Europe and, to a lesser extent, on the Soviet Union. The pressure on Moscow to introduce revolutionary information technology and techniques, in order to keep from falling further behind economically, may prove a powerful stimulus in the same direction. But we are still a long way from a Soviet public opinion with the information it needs, and with the opportunity to use it effectively within the political system.

The second effect, for all the special pleading that will no doubt come from Party conservatives, is one that a determined Soviet leadership could much more readily do something about without loosening the reins of political control. And that is to do what is necessary to ensure adequate verification of agreements on arms control and disarmament.

Reykjavik has brought out very clearly the fact that the disarmament agenda is now much more ambitious and more radical than would have been thought possible a few years ago - or even perhaps a few months ago; there is now a great deal to play for in the negotiations in Geneva and elsewhere; but the question of verification remains crucial, and it is all the more important that we should get it right.

How much is enough is a difficult question in this field as in others, and it has already given rise to a good deal of controversy in the West. It may help to reduce the amount of heat in the controversy, and to increase the light, if one seeks first of all to exclude the two extremes. At one end of the spectrum, there are those whose views on what should be required to verify a particular agreement seem coloured by a certain distaste for reaching agreement in the first place. At the other, there are those who appear to believe that everything can be done by satellites, or that what can't can safely be taken on trust.

In between the two is the view that there are arms control and disarmament agreements to be made in the security interests of both sides; that we should be doing everything we can to secure them; that agreements that cannot effectively be verified constitute an incentive more to cheating than to strict compliance, and thus tend to undermine the confidence on which further progress depends; that effective verification is conversely a very substantial confidence-building measure in its own right; and that the whole question is much more difficult in the Soviet Union than it is in a society where parliamentary committees and a free press do most of the job anyway.

To say that does not answer the question of how much is enough; but it does underline its importance and suggest the need to look at it case by case.

The more you do so, the less convincing is the idea that satellites will provide a quick fix for everything. Satellites, for example, may give you a good idea of how many of certain kinds of missiles have been deployed, or of how many submarines are being produced. But what you may need to know is how many missiles are being produced; and what is happening in industrial plants of the kind that could make components for chemical weapons. And those are not questions that can be answered from outer space.

These are illustrations - and there are many more - of what pessimists call the verification barrier. Some would conclude that we should give up the hope of extending arms control and disarmament beyond what can be verified by satellite; and others that we should give up our insistence on adequate verification. But both are wrong, because there is a perfectly sensible third option: to raise the barrier.

And that, given the asymmetry between what is verifiable in the East and in the West, even without formal provisions for verification, is very much a test for Mr Gorbachev. It is a test that he appears to be taking more seriously than his predecessors: the Soviet Union has recently, for example, accepted on-site inspections at the Stockholm Conference on military confidence-building measures; and there are signs of a more forthcoming attitude also in the Geneva negotiations on chemical warfare. There is further to go, both in theory and in practice, but the prize is a substantial one: the world can be made a lot more safe if Mr Gorbachev will make the Soviet Union a little more open. x

That is hardly an exhaustive treatment of the effects of secrecy on East-West relations; but I still have attention to detail, perseverance and patience to deal with. Happily for all of us, there is a certain amount of overlap; and I would propose to paint with a broad brush rather than with three small ones.

De Tocqueville's argument is in this field very much the stuff of current politics. I wish I had a bottle of champagne for every time that I have heard or read someone complaining that Western countries were not prepared to pay sufficient attention to the small print; or to maintain a negotiating position for long enough to convince the Soviet side that they would have to address themselves seriously to it; or, more generally, to stick to a sound political and military strategy for long enough to give it time to work. For that matter, I wish I had a bottle of champagne for every time I've made those points myself.

What inspires this sort of reflection is not only a certain volatility in political attitudes in the West, but the contrast between that and a picture of the Soviet Union holding firmly to course over a much longer term.

We should not take that picture entirely at face value, not least because the idea of the wheel of history turning remorselessly towards communism is one that the Soviet leaders need to propagate for domestic consumption. It is TINA writ large - as it has to be, when you consider that the Soviet regime will next year be seeking a second seventy-year term. And it also has the liturgical overtones thought appropriate to an ideology that combines its atheism with the claim that Lenin is more alive than the living.

In other words, Soviet propaganda - and not least the propaganda that is addressed to the internal audience - partly responds to, just as it partly inspired, the Muscovite riddle of the Brezhnev era:

"What is the shortest joke in the world?"

"Communism".

"And what is the longest?"

"The road thereto".

Time will tell whether Gorbachev is able to persuade the more cynical members of the population - and, indeed, of the party - that communism has become less of a joke; or the road to it less long or more attractive. Meanwhile, talk of reform will no doubt continue to be accompanied by quotations from Lenin; and I suspect that the quotations would flow faster still if reform went much beyond the realm of talk. There is little reason to believe that foreign affairs will be different; and Mr Gorbachev will certainly be able to put his finger more quickly than I could on that useful quotation about tactical zig-zags.

So much, then, for the correctives. But, when all is said and done, there is no doubt that the Soviet leadership does work to a political calendar much longer drawn-out than our own.

It is no accident, as Pravda didn't quite put it, that Mr Gromyko served nearly thirty years as Foreign Minister before moving upstairs. And when Mr Gorbachev lards his speeches with references to the year 2000, we should be careful not to dismiss that as no more than a rhetorical gimmick.

On the contrary, he may see good domestic reasons for taking that line, on the grounds that he is operating in a political system where it could be a sign of weakness not to give the impression that one expected to be still in charge a decade or so hence. And there may also be foreign policy reasons for his suggesting to this generation of Western leaders that he sees himself as having the option of doing business with the next.

That sense of having an option is, I believe, an important element in the Soviet approach to East-West relations; and it is reflected in a very keen interest in those seeking to form part of that next generation of Western leaders. And more particularly, of course, in what they have to say about defence and disarmament: the areas of policy that most immediately affect what earlier generations of British Foreign Secretaries would have called the balance of power and what is known in Soviet jargon as the world correlation of forces.

To talk of the balance of power now sounds rather old-fashioned in the West; but I see no evidence that the Soviet leaders are at all embarrassed when they talk about the correlation of forces - and, indeed, of what might best be done to shift that correlation in the Soviet favour.

I would be the first to admit that there is a lot that we do not know about the Soviet Union, but we should not assume that everything is riddle, mystery and enigma. On the contrary, it seems to me pretty clear from the record that Soviet leaders, given a low cost option to tilt the balance in their direction, are likely to take that option for the longer-term political advantages that they would see in it.

If, for example, they believe that they can get into a relatively stronger position by strengthening their forces, whether nuclear or conventional, without provoking a Western reaction, they will in all probability do so. And if they believe that Western countries, after the next election or two, will start to disarm unilaterally, they will be very strongly tempted to wait till then and to do nothing very much in the conference room in the meantime.

Or, to put the point another way, imagine that you were sitting around the table in the Politburo. How would you hope to persuade your colleagues to negotiate seriously with Western governments if half the Soviet Ambassadors in Western Europe were sending in telegrams that boiled down to: "no hurry, comrades; you'll get most of it for free if you'll only wait a little longer".

What we would surely all want to do is to stop spending more and more money on more and more arms, and to cut back on those that already exist, in such a way as to establish a fair and reliable balance at much lower levels. If you asked people in this and other allied countries whether they thought that a sensible objective, my guess is that a large majority would say yes.

That also happens to be very much the objective of NATO. And, although it would be something of an exaggeration to claim that public support for the objective and public support for NATO were one and the same, public opinion polls in member countries continue to reflect broad support for the Alliance. But positive replies to general questions about support for the Alliance do not necessarily mean support for particular aspects of NATO policy; just as support for the general objective I have suggested does not necessarily imply agreement on the means to achieve it. And that, you may feel, is something of an understatement.

The problem, in short, lies not so much in agreeing the objective but in agreeing how best to achieve it; and, having agreed, in showing enough patience, perseverance and attention to detail to convince the Soviet leaders of three things: that we are working for agreements that will respect the legitimate security interests of both sides; that we shall not be bounced or pressured into accepting agreements that do not respect our own; and that we shall continue to do what is necessary to ensure our own defence.

I see no reason to be as pessimistic as de Tocqueville on the subject; but those who have had the misfortune to read my speeches over the last year or so will know that I am concerned about the extent of the inter-party differences on major issues of defence policy that have emerged in a number of allied countries, including this one.

In recalling that, I am not trying to stand political maxims on their head, by suggesting that it is the duty of the opposition to support. Nor am I saying that the fundamentals of foreign and defence policy should in some way be fenced off from the normal democratic process, and sheltered from political scrutiny and debate. On the contrary, these are issues that are too important not to be very much within the democratic process. But it is important also that the scrutineers and the debaters should keep firmly in mind the significant differences between major changes in defence policy and, say, a penny or two on or off the income tax.

One could, of course, develop cases where the sums involved would appear rather similar to the experts in the Ministries of Finance. But that could hardly be further from the point.



What is to the point is that the Alliance is a system of collective defence that members have freely joined; that Alliance strategy has been decided upon by consensus; that NATO, like any other partnership, depends on an equitable sharing of burden and benefit; that what each partner does to implement the agreed strategy is decided upon after discussion and give and take in the planning machinery of the Alliance, subject always to the rule of consensus that ensures that no one can impose views on anyone else; and that we all of us are in effect basing our security on the assumption that our partners will do what they have said they will do.

I do not mean by that that nothing can ever change. Things are always changing, and the Alliance would not have survived in good order for nearly four decades if it had shown itself unable to adapt. But change to what has been collectively agreed should in itself be collectively agreed if partnership is not to be undermined. And it follows, as I put it to an SPD meeting in Bonn last year, that to consult, and to involve the Alliance as a whole in matters that affect the Alliance as a whole, are not just things that the Americans owe to their European allies. They are surely also things that their European allies owe to the Americans.

And, indeed, to each other: a point that is too often overlooked by those who sometimes appear to believe that defence is something we do just to please the Americans.

To return to my quotation, I do not believe that a democracy is unable, or that democracies in general are unable.

I see both the Atlantic Alliance and the European Community, although I have worked with both for long enough to know that neither is perfect, as weighty and encouraging evidence to the contrary; and as proof that democracies are in fact able to achieve a great deal, and to sustain that achievement over time, by working together. But to work together successfully in this way, democracies must also be able to sustain a sufficient degree of bipartisanship on the main issues.

It seems to me particularly true in the field of foreign and defence policy that the national interest does not change every four or five years. It is at least equally true that the interests that members of the Community and of the Alliance have in common do not change every four or five years. And where those interests have to be defended against - or promoted through negotiation with - the Soviet Union, the conclusion appears even more clearly: if we are not able to show stamina and consistency of purpose over the long haul, we will find the decisions that affect us being taken by others who are.

I am conscious that what I have done there is to state a problem rather than to suggest solutions. It is not a problem to which there is a simple, single answer; but it is a problem to which satisfactory answers nevertheless need to be found.

Politicians can help, by working together to stop the gaps getting any wider and to build consensus across party lines. And we can all of us help, because politicians will find it easier to do what I have suggested if efforts to define sensible common ground, and to build upon it, receive the support they deserve from an informed public opinion.

An informed public opinion that will, I hope, reflect on the lessons of the past as well as on the hopes for the future. I cannot prove to you that the peace, freedom and prosperity we have enjoyed in Western Europe for the past few decades has been anything but a historical accident. But, as someone once said, the harder I work, the luckier I get; and I have no doubt that what we have worked patiently and successfully to build up over these years, in the Atlantic Alliance and in the European Community, has been of the very greatest importance.

If we take the care needed to maintain that fabric, there is every prospect that we shall be able to do even better in the future - and not least in the field of East-West relations, where the prospects for real progress seem better than for many years. But it is an important "if", and the answer to de Tocqueville depends on it.