

Professionalism and partnership across borders

Andrew Holroyd, Damascus, 7 July 2008

Minister Ghafri, Members of the Syrian Bar Association. Ladies and Gentlemen.

On behalf of everyone at the Law Society of England and Wales, let me thank you for the honour and the pleasure of having this opportunity to address such a distinguished audience today; and to talk about the profession I am so proud to represent.

May I also thank you for the wonderful hospitality my wife, Caroline, and I have received. We may have only been here for a matter of days, but we have been greeted everywhere as friends, not strangers.

I once heard someone describe your country as the “largest small country in the world”. It is impossible not to see why. Syria is not only stunningly beautiful; it has such a wealth of history and heritage.

I’m told people here In Damascus have a proverb, “As-Sabr Miftah al-Faraj – patience is the key to happiness. It is easy to see why. Who could fail to be patient and happy in such a beautiful, enchanting and ancient city – a cradle of civilisation.

The sense of history here is everywhere. Yesterday we had the pleasure of seeing the magnificent Great Umayyad Mosque in all its glory, and discovered how the old and the ancient in Damascus blend so seamlessly with the new and the modern.

My own home city of Liverpool in the North-West of England calls itself “the world in one City” and has been crowned European Capital of Culture 2008. What a coincidence to have the opportunity to visit the Arab Capital of Culture 2008! It is something I shall never forget.

While in many ways so different, I believe Damascus and London, and Syria and the United Kingdom, also share a great deal in common.

We too maybe a small country, but we too are a country with a large history – a history that the legal community has played such a pivotal role in shaping.

We are the nation of the Magna Carta. Written in 1215, that simple document sets out so many of the freedoms we enjoy, such as habeas corpus: the right of any individual not to be imprisoned for long periods by the state without being told what charge they face. And we believe in the rule of law: the simple idea that governments govern, but the law is king.

These century old principles remain the foundation of our democracy and have been the inspiration for promoting justice and protecting freedoms far beyond our shores.

Even today, the first line of the solicitors' code of conduct by which we must all abide reads: "You must uphold the rule of law and the proper administration of justice".

We remain rooted to those principles. We believe it is our duty to support and show our solidarity with lawyers in countries like Pakistan and Zimbabwe, who have demonstrated such courage, fortitude and bravery during troubled times. And that's why I'm proud that we created an online petition condemning events in Pakistan last year, where hundreds of lawyers and scores of judges were arrested simply for daring to stand up for the rule of law.

The petition was signed by thousands of lawyers across the world and we, together with Ifath Nawaz, Chair of the United Kingdom Association of Muslim Lawyers, delivered it in person to number 10 Downing Street on International Human Rights day last December.

It is also for that reason – because we believe in justice and liberty; and because we believe human rights are inalienable – that we have been so vocal in opposing the illegal imprisonment of so many people in Guantanamo Bay.

I will never forget, while at the American Bar Association last year, hearing a representative from the US army casually state that 23,000 people – 23,000 people – were at that very moment interned in Iraq. This insouciant disregard for the rule of law only serves to underline the importance of the voice of lawyers across the world.

I certainly do not come here boasting any moral authority. Only three decades ago the UK Government was responsible for interning hundreds of our own fellow citizens without charge in Northern Ireland. The policy not only contradicted our own principles, but it was totally counter-productive and an unmitigated disaster.

How fleeting memories can be. Today, in 2008, I fear the UK Government is failing to learn from the mistakes of the past by trying to introduce legislation to enable the state to detain terrorist suspects without charge for 42 days.

Last week we hosted an event with the Association of Muslim Lawyers to examine and debate these proposals. This so-called counter-terrorism legislation can only be described as counter-productive legislation. It will erode the long-held and long-cherished rights that make our society what it is. And it will only alienate the very people whose hearts and minds we so need to win.

I come here representing the solicitors profession in England and Wales; a profession that has evolved and grown over hundreds of years.

Yet that evolution and that growth has been most pronounced during my time as a lawyer, and I have witnessed the profession grow from 29,000 in 1974 to nearly 140,000 today. Those 140,000 solicitors can be proud of their contribution to our nation.

We generate nearly two percent of the UK's Gross Domestic Product (two in every 100 pounds of the nation's wealth) and through pro bono work – where lawyers give up their time for free to provide advice to ensure the most vulnerable, marginalised and disadvantaged in society have a voice and access to justice – we contributed the financial equivalent of nearly half a billion pounds worth of advice in the last year.

London is one of the legal capitals of the world because it is such an attractive place to practice law. Our regulation is proportionate and not over-burdensome unlike some other major markets, and our legal system and judges are of the highest calibre and integrity.

I'm also proud to represent such a diverse profession – everything from sole practitioners providing both niche or a range of services; to small partnerships serving small businesses; to large, global firms, advising multinational companies and organisations.

Just as Syria has for millennia been a melting pot for different peoples, with a amazing collection of different cultures, customs and religions, we in the UK now have a wonderfully rich multicultural society.

Over 300 different languages are spoken in London alone. Indeed if many of you in the audience were to walk around London you might hear a very familiar accent, as many of the 22,000 Syrians who live in the UK have made our nation's capital their home.

That diversity of peoples in the UK is reflected in the diversity of our profession. And while the Law Society represents every single solicitor in England and Wales we are also proud to work in partnership with groups specifically representing minorities, such as the Society for Asian Lawyers, Black Solicitors Network and Association of Muslim Lawyers.

Over the last 12 months as President I have had the privilege of speaking at conferences everywhere from Nairobi to Abuja and from Los Angeles to Singapore.

The very fact that the global legal profession is working closer together than ever before is, I believe, important for far more than mere kinship.

Globalisation is the most dominant dynamic in the world today. From silk to the highest tech computers; from spices to the latest mobile phone. Trade across national boundaries and frontiers is nothing new.

But it is changing. We are not only seeing an acceleration of an ancient process, we are also witnessing it transform in another way. Today it is not just goods that are global, but services too. Take London. In the last two decades alone the city has become a home to lawyers from across the world, bringing with them new ideas, innovation and investment.

At the same time the demand for many of our lawyers to provide their services overseas has increased exponentially. Today nearly one in ten of our members work abroad, in 93 different countries. Some of our firms have provided advice here in Syria, and continue to work closely with Syrian firms. Others have been very successful in places like Dubai, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman where they been crucial in helping build economic strength and development in the region.

The Law Society of England and Wales is working closer than ever before with friends in jurisdictions overseas. By sharing our expertise and experience with sister bodies across the world, I believe we can help play an important role in bringing the world's legal community even closer together.

In the last 100 days alone I've met the Chief Justice of Nepal; the Vietnamese Justice Minister; and the Indian Justice Minister, together with the leaders of both the Chinese and the India legal professions. Four very different countries with four very different jurisdictions and four very different legal professions, yet they have all sought to learn from our profession.

In March, I visited a project in Lagos run by the Law Society and a Nigerian lawyers' group, working to provide legal aid advice and promote and protect access to justice. It is helping to strengthen the rule of law and has the support of 15 State Attorney Generals across the country.

We were very proud to be involved in a Project in partnership with the Arab Lawyers' Union, and I would like to pay tribute to the work of Farouk Abou Eissa, the Secretary General of the Union, who played such a key role in making it happen.

Working with over 800 lawyers from Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, the Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan and of course Syria was not just an opportunity to help train lawyers, but for us to learn more about the work of lawyers in such a diverse range of jurisdictions.

Aside from the very important Human Rights and Rule of Law work, I know that the focus on Law Firms and specialisation was of great value. Having a vibrant and dynamic legal sector – and one which reflects the needs of business – is as important here in Damascus as it is in London, Cairo, Abu Dhabi or any other of the world's great cities.

Economists may highlight the business potential of Syria by pointing to figures and complex economic calculations, but I've seen it on the streets; I've seen it through the work of the British Syrian Society and (in the last hour) I've have heard it here, in this conference hall.

If I have taken one thing away from my travels to Europe and to Asia, America and Africa, it is that if economies are to flourish they need businesses to truly thrive.

That requires many things. But at the top of the list is to have the right investment climate. Businesses and investors need confidence. And confidence comes from having the rule of law; having a legal system that businesses can trust; and having a legal profession that can meet the demands of all businesses, from the smallest enterprise to the largest multinational.

We recently conducted a review of commercial law in Libya to help them fully understand the needs of international investors. We would welcome the opportunity to see if there are any ways we could assist you, so that new laws and regulations here in Syria meet the needs of businesses, investors and the international market.

That sort of partnership is at the heart of the philosophy of our profession and our desire to work with the international legal community, so that we can share our experiences in other jurisdictions and learn more about the law and lawyers abroad.

Let me close by thanking you once again for the invitation to speak here today, in this great City.

I am delighted to have travelled from one capital of culture to another, and to have had the privilege of being the first ever President of the Law Society of England and Wales to address a conference in Syria. I hope I am the first of many Presidents of the Law Society to visit your country because I believe partnership and progress go hand-in-hand.

I wish you all an enjoyable, informative and successful conference.

Thank you.

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