

LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL 50TH ANNIVERSARY
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Thank you. Let me begin by saying how much the National Democratic Institute values its association with the Liberal International. Your partnership is essential to our work; NDI understands very well that democracy building is a shared endeavor. It is not, it cannot be, purely American enterprise. Our relationship with the Liberal International legitimates our efforts on the world stage. It gives us strengths we would not have if we operated alone.

Members of Liberal parties and the Liberal International organization have been our colleagues – monitoring elections, sharing skills in city management, helping parliaments become more professional, building parties. To each of you who has joined with us, I say, thank you. You are our natural partners, our allies, our friends. NDI looks forward to a continued partnership for many years to come.

Today, I am not going to offer my thoughts about Liberal Thought. There are many others who can do this more eloquently than I. Instead, I want to talk about the development of political institutions in the world today, and the pivotal role the Liberal International has to play.

When Isaiah Berlin, who died just weeks ago, spoke about political consciousness, he talked about “the hunger for recognition,” the desire “to count for something among the cultures of the world.” Professor Berlin understood that the desire for recognition has become the dominant force in world affairs. Nation after nation now recognizes that to succeed, it must compete, and to compete, it must modernize politically, as well as economically.

Liberal principles now govern the discourse within nations: respect for the individual; a belief in the devolution of power; an insistence on accountability at the local and national levels; a respect for individual choices in the market and society; and an unshakable commitment to freedom as a creative force.

The world is speaking our language. Competition increasingly governs the lives of nations, and that is mostly a positive development. Autocrats are increasingly isolated, economically as well as politically; even those who cling to power now speak the democratic idiom, endorsing elections, accountability, the marketplace. Yet those who think they can survive on words alone are falling behind, nations no less than autocrats.

The process is self-sustaining; indeed, it is self-accelerating: The free market is more established and open than it was five years ago. Democratic institutions are more entrenched and open than it was five years ago. Governments continue to experiment – and sometimes to fail – but societies increasingly operate on the assumption that the only reasonable options are those that are parliamentary and peaceful. And the bar continues to be raised, as democracies take root and expand their competition.

Isaiah Berlin was right: The desire “to count for something” now drives the renewal of nations. We are witnessing a battle for legitimacy. Progressively, inexorably, it is isolating anyone who thinks that power in the parliament or the marketplace can be acquired or held without the participation and consent of ordinary citizens.

The Liberal International represents another front in this battle. This is, after all, an association of democratic parties; NDI is proud to be an American chapter. This meeting constitutes what one U.S. Senator called, “A nongovernmental form of statecraft.” Because it is within your province to aid political parties and confer legitimacy upon them, the Liberal International has a critical role to play in the cause of peace.

I am not speaking now to you as Liberals, but as individuals committed to democratic politics and political parties. In our deliberations this week, we need, I think, to focus on political parties. I certainly appreciate their shortcomings and failures; yet political parties are indispensable to the work of democracy. Because that is so, the fate of political parties will determine the prospects for freedom in new democracies and old ones.

In recent years, civil society in new and emerging democracies has become the favored child of international assistance. It has been described as the wellspring of democracy, a romantic, if perhaps, exaggerated claim. The international community has buttressed civic organizations, aided them, and abetted their rise, often from the ashes of discredited political parties. This has been a good and necessary endeavor; NDI participated in it and continues to do so.

Yet I fear that the focus on civil society is moving beyond fashion. For some, it has become an obsession, a mantra. There is a distinct danger in this.

Increasingly, resources are being channeled to programs that develop civil society to the exclusion of political parties and political institutions such as parliaments. I know that many feel that is more virtuous to be a member of a civic organization than a party. That parties have to wait until there is a certain level of societal development. That parties will emerge naturally.

But this is wrong on its face and dangerous besides.

I recently met with Grigory Yavlinsky, the head of the Russian Yablako party who spoke to us earlier today. He spoke precisely to the notion that you can aid civil society while ignoring parties. Mr. Yavlinsky argued forcefully that, unlike the United States, Russia does not have the luxury to wait 200 years before political parties develop. He pointed out that Russian parties, albeit weak, already are competing in elections and serving in the State Duma. They are being required to perform and are being judged. “Our political institutions,” he said, “must develop along with our civil society.”

Yavlinsky understood that a civil society without effective political institutions quickly creates a political vacuum. That it sows opportunities for demagogues who promise to cut out the middlemen such as parliaments which are the foundation of representative government. That it sets the stage for a so-called “people’s democracy,” or worse, a savior of the nation.

As democrats, as Liberals, let us understand: All politics may be local, as the late Speaker of the U.S. Congress, Tip O’Neill, once observed, but political parties help people place their local concerns in a national context. Parties mediate. They create common ground. By definition, their vision goes beyond the town limits and county lines. Political parties aggregate interests, especially in diverse societies. They create grounds for compromise. And thus they help societies unite and remain united.

Political parties balance the tossing and pitching of the ship of state. By their very nature, they possess a certain ponderousness, and this is often a good thing, for it slows new ideas enough to broaden their support, while exposing their reckless elements to analysis and criticism. Party structure is inherently consultative, and the nature of parties creates plans for action, not plans for revolution. When popular emotions toss the ship of state, political parties are the stabilizing keel.

Civic organizations do indeed deal with political and government institutions. They represent and they mediate. Yet they are local and parochial, and since they are presented as the voice of the people, in the absence of permanent political institutions, they can invite direct entreaties to the populace at large.

This is especially true where governments are weak or underdeveloped or corrupt. Without parties and political institutions that transcend both time and place, the door is opened to someone who will ignore the institutions of government, especially any system of checks and balance and the respect for the rule of law. Political parties are not perfect, but no other national institution can serve as well to impede government by fiat, government by mob, government by strongman.

Political parties thus help to guarantee democratic continuity. If history is to view this decade as a time of democratic emergence and not a passing democratic flirtation, then we must rededicate ourselves to building political parties.

Must we choose between civil society groups and political parties? Certainly not. This is a false choice. Parties are the natural partner of civil society. Yes, politics is more untidy, more ambiguous. Yes, politics forces you to make choices and alienate some elements of society – and donors. Yes, by supporting political parties, we run the risk of being accused of meddling in the internal affairs of other nations.

But the state of the art is such that we do know how to provide assistance without injecting ourselves into the fray. And we also know that aiding civil society carries the same risks, and that they are equally manageable. Those who think that by holding

ourselves aloof from party building, we can mollify our critics, have much to learn about how the world really works.

There has to be a call to action. All of us have in our offices public opinion surveys that document the crisis of confidence in our political parties. This is a problem for established democracies and emerging democracies alike. Certainly, party building abroad cannot be an excuse for the failure to pursue party reform at home. Yet even as we renew our own political institutions, we have to put party development overseas on an equal footing with programs that nurture civil society.

A final point: The fate of parties in emerging democracies is not just an issue for liberals. It concerns every practitioner of democracy, every Social Democrat, Christian Democrat, Conservative. This endeavor provides a chance for us to build bridges at home as well as abroad. In so doing, we will remind our countrymen of the values we share. Established democracies, no less than emerging ones, will be strengthened.

Each of us, all of us, must rededicate our efforts. This Liberal International, celebrating its commitment to internationalism and democracy, is an appropriate place to begin.