“The First Law of Ashdown and the Theory of Everything”

Lord Ashdown Visits Yale University

BY JOHAN VAN RIJN

Lord Ashdown has had a dynamic life. After serving as an officer in the Royal Marines for 13 years, he joined the British Foreign Office. In 1983, Ashdown entered Parliament as a member of the Liberal Democrats. A mere five years later, he was elected leader of his Party. Ashdown stood down in 1999 and retired from the Commons in 2001. Subsequently, Lord Ashdown became High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European Union Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina from May 2002 until January 2006. He was a strong advocate for humanitarian intervention in the Balkans and is regarded as an expert on this region.

Lord Ashdown was invited to Yale by the current Pierre Keller fellow of Transatlantic Studies, Dr. Alison Holmes, who worked for the Liberal Democrats for ten years under Paddy’s leadership. Ashdown spoke at six events during his two-day visit, which was sponsored by the European Studies Council, the European Union Studies Program, the International Affairs Council, International Security Studies and the MacMillan Center.

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In his 2000 pamphlet “The Invisible Revolution”, Ashdown argues that globalization has signaled the end of the state as the sole international actor. The changing relationship between the citizen and his government will have to result in devolution to lower levels of governance, while at the same time inter-
national problems make pooling of sovereignty with higher levels a necessity. Supranational institutions should deliver to our citizens what the nation-states cannot, as is happening with European integration. The local, national, and global problems of our time can, according to Ashdown, only be addressed by adopting Liberal ideas and policies. Nation-states should bring power back to the citizens, and transfer power to supranational organizations when needed.

Not only are the forces of globalization changing the international system but, as Ashdown suggests, the global order is also affected by the shift of power to the East. The world is becoming multipolar; the United States will still be the most powerful actor, but others, especially China, will increase in both absolute and relative strength. This changing environment makes this bilateral relationship between the United States and China extremely important. The United States will remain capable of shaping a world order based on rules and norms, which the Chinese will probably accept if that order is accommodating. After all, according to Ashdown, China is a mercantilist nation which needs a rules-based system to operate effectively. China is in this respect different from Russia, which is willing to operate in a “criminal world” without clear rules. However, to get China to agree to a reformed world order, the United States cannot escape a necessary change of the rules themselves. It will need to compromise on some of its values, and this process will be both “messy and nasty”. During the ‘90s, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and President Clinton had the chance to change the global order in the West’s best long term interests, but they failed to grasp the opportunity. Now the West must act quickly to reform the global order, Ashdown states, so that the system will be accommodating yet still comprising our main values.

Lord Ashdown stresses that Europe should unite further, not only to address the needs of its citizens but also because the strategic environment is changing dramatically. While Europe becomes less important to the United States as China rises in power, Europe can still remain relevant to U.S. foreign policy. Europe needs to “get its act together” and evolve into a more credible international actor which conducts a common security policy. The bonds with the United States should be strengthened and the transatlantic relationship will have to “mature”. Ashdown imagines a partnership of equals, just as former Secretary of State Kissinger envisioned a “twin pillar NATO”, and argues this dialogue of equals is also what America needs in ever more turbulent times. President
Obama seems to agree as he has recently stated that he wants Europe to be an effective international actor. According to Ashdown, transatlantic history and sentimentality are no longer sufficient; Europe should display more unity and more capability to be useful to the United States, especially in its own “backyard”. Ashdown believes that the Lisbon Treaty is a good first step in the direction of a more unified and forceful European foreign policy.

“After Iraq and Afghanistan: Shall we ever intervene again?”

The changing security environment has severe implications for the role that interventions can play in international relations. Lord Ashdown sketches a dark image of the time ahead. As mentioned before, an exceedingly turbulent international environment challenges us to bring governance to the global space. According to Ashdown, we should work on legal structures that allow us to interfere in domestic jurisdictions when this is needed to deal with new threats that undermine global security. Interventions could be the solution to solve cross-border instability and the falling apart of weak states. Interventions have proved to work in the past and are thus a viable instrument to address the weaknesses in our international system. The lessons of history should be learned to prevent future interventions from becoming like Afghanistan and Iraq, which were, he suggests, the products of “hubris and amnesia”. For instance, the United Nations has turned out to be more able to stabilize post-conflict situations than coalitions of the willing. Another specific lesson is that intervening countries should not raise the bar too high; the institutions in the troubled country should come to resemble the quality of similar institutions in the region, and should not be judged by purely Western standards.

Ashdown offers some more general lessons on humanitarian interventions. The first lesson is that we should, as best as we can, prevent war in the first place by shoring up institutions that appear to be failing. Preventing conflict saves precious lives and money for both the failing state and the would-be interveners. Second, we have to understand that the aftermath is just as, or even more, important than the war itself. Wars can be quickly won, as Iraq has shown, but we should also “plan for the peace that follows”. Thirdly, there is a hierarchy of needs: people need security first. As soon as security is guaranteed, the interveners should move on to fight corruption and establish a rule of law. These two components are especially important to sustain stability and create trust in the nation’s institutions. Both a well-functioning police force and a qualified judiciary are needed to achieve these goals. After having established these basic
foundations, it is important to get the economy going again to create economic opportunity and prevent deprivation. In Ashdown’s words, “let people feel progress”.

As a last lesson, Ashdown states that interveners should help build the type of democracy that does not undermine the rule of law. In fact, especially in the initial phases of reconstruction, the rule of law is more important than democracy: the proper checks and balances should be established in the political system before elections take place. To prevent a meltdown of the system, elections should be held “as late as decently possible”; something Ashdown has done while presiding over Bosnia. He refers to the situation in Germany after the Second World War, where elections took place only after the Allied powers had firmly established the constitution. Ashdown is thus very clear in his argument. As we move into a turbulent era, the international community should intervene in domestic jurisdictions to prevent threats to the wider peace. The main lesson from Afghanistan and Iraq is not to stop intervening; rather, it is to intervene in better ways.

The Middle East

When asked whether the current situation in Israel and Palestine was an “obvious train wreck”, Ashdown first replied with a display of his broader narrative. Our world is more interdependent than ever before, a fact which was clearly revealed by the terrorist attack of 9/11. The reality is that we “share a destiny with our enemy” and “have a shared security”. According to Ashdown, Israel has failed in its policies because it does not understand that it shares a destiny with Palestine. Israeli policy is then self-defeating and may eventually lead to its own destruction. Ashdown suggests that President Obama has adopted a more nuanced approach to the problems in the Middle East than his predecessor.

The key issue, according to Ashdown, is that Israel must understand it cannot sustain the illegal settlements any longer; the Israeli people themselves are willing to give up the settlements to secure a lasting peace. While acknowledging the terrorist actions that are carried out by Hamas, Ashdown maintained that Israeli policy should change to alleviate the grievances of the Palestinian population. Building walls does not work: it does not keep the terrorists out and creates deprivation and hopelessness in the lives of Palestinian people. Contrasting this to the former situation in Northern Ireland, Ashdown states that the government there neither divided up society nor subjected people to
lasting restrictions. Achieving peace in the long term will be extremely difficult, but it surely cannot be reached by suppression.

Democracy and Intervention

According to Ashdown, it is ineffective to impose democracy on countries. The West has to scale back its ambitions to delivering a system of justice and denying space to extremists. Intervening for democracy alone should be out of the question. While he is a “passionate believer” in the democratic process, Ashdown stresses the need to tailor to a country’s specific situation. For example, in Afghanistan the real power lies at the tribal level; the U.S. model of democracy simply cannot function there. Democracy can take many forms, and we should not worry too much about the specific democratic process. In countries that are being rebuilt, creating a strong rule of law with proper checks and balances should have prime importance.