


This speech was given by Pete Ashby for his Asian lecture tour in February 2004, organised by the Asia-Europe Foundation. The lectures were hosted by the ASEF (Singapore), the Institute of Occidental Studies (Kuala Lumpur), the Center for European Studies (Bangkok), the Habibie Centre (Jakarta) and the Institute for Policy and Community Development Studies (Manila).

The speech was published in the Asia Europe Journal (2004).

Creating a new politics of trust

 I want to consider the importance of trust and integrity in the development of our democracies. I will propose that a shift in our value systems, towards emphasising the personal qualities of trust and integrity on the part of our political leaders, could play an extremely important role in improving the quality of all of our democracies in Asia and Europe.

I recognise that a number of countries in Asia have come to the view that political corruption is so deeply embedded that tougher institutional and legal strategies are essential if it is to be curbed. This corruption now seems to be so all-pervasive that many believe that it will be impossible ever to become free from it.

My concern, however, is that an undue reliance on anti-corruption strategies that simply punish people found to be corrupt in some way can easily reinforce the widely held view that politics is full of “rotten politicians”.

No one could argue that countries facing severe corruption could take on this challenge successfully without having a variety of formal mechanisms in place for rooting out corruption. What I want to suggest to you today is that we now need to develop alongside them new cultural strategies for attracting people of the highest integrity to leadership positions in politics.

The struggle for a higher trust society

There are now very high levels of distrust in Asia and Europe, both in how we as individuals view our governments, and governments view us. The seriousness of the problem was reflected in a recent survey in the UK, which showed that one in every three people say that they trust the government less than they used to, and only one in every four now say that they feel able to trust what the government says to be true.

This is most worrying, not least because the non-democracies are bound to question the advantages of our democratic way of life when opinion polls reveal that most people don't trust their democratically elected government.

The single most important decision

This crisis of trust is especially alarming when you consider the extent to which the people are excluded from some of the most important decisions taken by our democratically elected leaders.

Take the single most important decision facing any political leader, namely whether or not to take their country to war. The nature of modern-day intelligence is such that it simply can't be shared very widely, and indeed one of the things that we have all learnt from the months leading up to the Iraq war is that the very process of trying to turn complicated judgements into dossiers and newspaper articles suitable for a mass audience can end up doing a considerable disservice to the truth.

Decisions about war and peace will continue to be taken by our top political leaders, and whether we like it or not, we need to face up to that fact.

Iraq, integrity and the missing WMD

This issue is very topical for us in the UK, as we all consider the continuing non-discovery of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, and remember the words of our Prime Minister when he assured us that the reason we had to send British troops to join the American-led invasion was because Saddam's Weapons of Mass Destruction represent a "*current and serious threat*" to our national security.

As we all know, even 12 months after the invasion there is no trace of these weapons.

Even though it was clear months ago that the American and British governments had got something badly wrong in the reasons that they gave us for going to war with Iraq, neither the British Prime Minister nor the American President has been able to say at any time to their people "*sorry, we might have made a mistake when we told you that Saddam had Weapons of Mass Destruction*".

As yet, there has been no hint of an apology.

It's tempting to say that, yet again, this shows how little politicians trust us. However, it is only too easy to point the finger of blame at them. The fact is that we are part of the problem, as well.

We now need to ask why it is that we help to make it almost impossible for people in leadership positions to be honest with us when they make a mistake.

If one of our political leaders admits to having got something wrong, do we regard such an admission as a sign of strength and maturity? Hardly!

Every leader knows that if they admit publicly to having got something wrong, they will be widely seen as having failed, and weakened their position as a result.

The simple fact is that if we want people in leadership positions to be more open with us, we have got to look again at how we behave towards them.

The challenge of religious fundamentalism

The circumstances surrounding the war with Iraq show how people can make very firm assertions, about which they are 100% definite, only to find a few months later that the evidence on which those claims were based isn't anything like as secure as they believed at the time. The truth is not as easy to establish, as we often like to imagine.

It's useful to remind ourselves of this, because it also underlines how dangerous are those religious fundamentalists that insist on a series of absolute truths, which they ask us to accept as given and not open to question.

This talk is not on the theme of fundamentalism, and so I will be careful to be brief on this topic. However, I think I should make clear where I stand on it because it influences much of what I want to say.

I personally believe that the single greatest threat to world peace is almost certainly posed by Islamic fundamentalism. This is partly because of the structure of Islam as a faith, and the lack of any clear leadership with the authority to outlaw those extremist groups that are currently trying to hijack Islam.

It is also because some of the concepts underpinning Islam, and especially the notion of the Ummah as a global community of Muslims, make it possible for a few charismatic Imams to argue that Muslims must see themselves as engaged in a religious jihad against non-Muslims.

For a variety of reasons, I believe that those small fanatical groups that misrepresent the true peace-loving nature of Islam and encourage religious hatred pose a growing threat to our global security.

However, it isn't just Islamic fundamentalism that is a social menace. As a Christian, I also worry a lot about the growth of Christian and Jewish fundamentalism.

All forms of religious fundamentalism are potentially threatening to us because, in their different ways, they undermine our trust in our own judgement and intuition.

In doing so, they make it that much more difficult for fundamentalists to have trusting relationships with others who don't sign up to their particular brand of belief.

Letting relationships, rather than institutions, come up front

If we were given the chance to change one fundamental thing about the way we organise our global affairs, to try and make the world a safer place, what would that be?

Somehow we need to change the way in which people relate to our national governments and global political bodies. We all need to stop thinking of them as institutions, and instead concentrate on how we want to relate to them, and how we think they should relate to each other.

We need to let these relationships come up front, and make the institutions fade much more into the background.

One of the merits of viewing global politics more in terms of relationships is that they are something all of us experience every day of our lives. Life is all about building and managing relationships, and global politics could gain much if we seek to apply to it some of the lessons that we have learnt in our day-to-day relationships.

In fact, this way in to politics could be the key to restoring trust.

Let me mention three examples of what we often expect in a high trust relationship, and tend not to expect of our political leaders:

1. First, if we get something wrong in a close trusting relationship, as we all do more often than we would like, we know that we should be the first to own up. Often we try to keep quiet about things that we have got wrong, because all of us can be cowards. But we know that we honour the other person if we are the one to say *“hey, you know what I said or did the other week, well, I was wrong about that, and with the benefit of hindsight I now think that **you** were much closer than **me** to being right!”*
2. Secondly, in a high trust relationship we can each change our mind about something, and that’s okay. You can say to your partner *“you remember I persuaded you that we should do such and such, well, having thought about it I now want to suggest something different”*. The ability to say in a relaxed way that you have changed your mind about something is a powerful sign of a relationship in which people really do trust and respect each other
3. Thirdly, I think it’s an important sign of a high trust relationship that where someone has got something quite badly wrong, and we have a choice between a generous interpretation of why they got that wrong, or an ungenerous interpretation, we give that person the benefit of the doubt and opt for the generous interpretation. After a few times of giving someone the benefit of the doubt and being proved wrong every time, we might have to accept that we were mistaken in our judgement of them. That can be painful, but then it reminds us of the quality of the other relationships where we are right to give people the benefit of the doubt.

If these principles could somehow be applied to the world of politics, we would see people trusting their leaders enough to feel confident that if they have some bad news, they would give it to them without delay.

And we would see politicians trusting the people enough to feel that they could give them some bad news, knowing that the people wouldn't turn against them for sharing news that they don't particularly want to hear.

In other words, we would see a two-way process, in which one side gives the other the benefit of the doubt.

In this climate, it would become possible for politicians to be open with the people about their mistakes. And the people would seek to forgive their political leaders for their mistakes, just as we all seek to forgive ourselves for our own. It wouldn't always be easy, but at least the goodwill would be there.

At this point you might be forgiven for thinking that I have taken off in a space ship, heading for another planet that doesn't have much to do with our world! It's absolutely true that this is a description of relationships quite unlike those that we tend to see at the moment in politics.

This is an aspiration. We can both aspire to achieve it and recognise that we have a long way to go before we get there.

A challenge to Asian culture in particular

In raising these ideas, I need to admit that they do not sit comfortably with a lot of Asian culture. I have great respect for Asian ways of working, and particularly the profound instinct that you must never seek to cause offence to others. Sometimes Asians will deny that someone has done any wrong just to spare them any embarrassment, and the idea of publicly acknowledging mistakes really goes against the grain.

It will be difficult to change this attitude, even over time. But I think it has got to be challenged, because so often the result is that no one learns any lessons from what has gone wrong, or takes any responsibility. Similarly, there are many honourable aspects to the very strong Asian commitment to building consensus. However, my view is that consensus isn't always a good thing.

Sometimes people go so far in trying to create a consensus that they end up combining mutually inconsistent positions into a single statement, with the result that no one really knows what the so-called consensus means or stands for.

Also, there are times when a consensus statement actually reflects a significant shift in position, but nothing is said about this to avoid anyone losing face. Others are then left guessing as to whether or not the position has changed, and if so, why. This doesn't really help in developing more trusting relationships.

Developing a higher trust culture requires us all to be honest about differences where they do exist, and to articulate them openly, on the basis that in expressing them we each accept that we might be wrong, and are willing to move on in our thinking - just as we invite others to move on in theirs.

Honouring the people's anger

We know that whatever anyone might say about trust and integrity, what the people want are candidates and parties at elections who will get their economy moving. Quite rightly so. At the same time, these elections do provide an important opportunity to say that you need people of integrity and trust to be coming forward, and where demands are being made on candidates the issue of trust should be very high up the list.

I recognise that this is an extremely difficult argument to advance in countries where there are large numbers of people who have lost faith in the idea that anything can change for the better.

For them, it will be very difficult to achieve any movement forward until they can find some way of leaving behind their anger with all those politicians and others who they believe have abused their trust.

And more often than not, people can only leave that anger behind if they feel that it is being heard, and honoured, by the powers that be.

Quite frankly, in a number of countries in Europe and Asia we need some sort of Truth and Reconciliation process before anyone can seriously argue the case for trying to embed a new politics of trust. And this is a process that can't be rushed.

During this time, we need to be saying very clearly that whatever awful abuses of human rights might have taken place in the past, nothing justifies giving up on tomorrow.

As we say this, we need to be holding out some sort of vision of what that tomorrow might look like, knowing that for quite a number of people it would involve the most dramatic re-writing of how they relate to politicians - and politicians relate to them.

Trust needs to be earned, and no one can expect if as of right.

This means that in any transitional process towards higher-trust models of democracy people are bound to be suspicious, and constantly wondering whether they might be on the receiving end of some sort of manipulation to try and dress up the same old discredited politicians in new clothes.

The UN: making trustworthiness a condition of membership

When one focuses on attitudes rather than institutions, people can sometimes say *“that’s all very interesting, but so what? What does this imply for changes on the part of our major global institutions, like the UN?”*

Actually, this approach would require fundamental changes in our global institutional machinery, not least in the workings of the UN itself.

It is a sad fact that for the sake of trying to keep everyone happy, and part of a global consensus, the UN has set in place a series of relationships between member states that are in some ways morally quite corrupt.

I believe that the founding principle on which the United Nations is based, that of “sovereign equality”, flies in the face of any of our experiences of how to encourage trusting relationships.

The UN groups together all member states, the most trustworthy and the least trustworthy, as members of one single club, and grants them all equality as sovereign states in their dealings with each other. The result is that everyone treats nearly everyone else on the basis that they can’t be trusted, which is not the way we want to be running the global body charged with protecting our common security.

It won’t be easy to make it happen, but if we want a set of global relationships that do work, we have got to find a way of drawing a clear dividing line between those states that can be trusted and those that can’t.

We need certain minimum terms for membership of the UN, or some other new body, so that all member states know that they can look to all other members for at least a certain level of honesty and openness in their dealings with them.

A United Nations that includes all states in it, as of right, is a body of nations that can’t be trusted to deliver what they promise, and we have seen that time and again over the past few years.

Identifying our next generation of leaders with integrity

I now want to turn to what I described earlier on as a “cultural strategy” for bringing more people of integrity into politics, and say a little about what I think that would need to involve.

Possibly most important for the longer term, it would need to involve us in appealing to all parents who believe that their children are growing up to be principled young people with a strong sense of integrity. Our appeal to them should be that instead of just encouraging their children to go into one of the professions with good career prospects, they should also urge them to consider putting their integrity to the service of their country, through politics.

I think that this strand of the strategy is critical. For the simple fact is that states with deep-seated corruption can pass as many laws as they want, but unless they have some really decent people of steel to make sure that they are implemented, and to argue for them and win those arguments, new laws alone won't do it.

We need these people not just at the top of politics, but also at the top of the police service, the military, the judiciary and the media. So, I think that our key targets need to be the next generation, and the one after that, and the one after that.

At the same time, we ourselves must be completely honest with people about what they would be taking on. The road of integrity is not always the one most likely to win votes, and that needs to be said strongly as part of any new push to encourage more people of the highest integrity to enter politics.

We know that the political pressures of democratic movements, and the imperatives of personal integrity, are not always forces that pull in the same direction.

As history has shown us on so many occasions, the pressure of these demands can stretch the integrity of elected leaders almost to breaking point, and sometimes beyond.

Recognising the increasing concentration of power

I deliberately mentioned terrorism earlier on, even though I am sure that there is little chance of all of us agreeing about the nature or extent of the terrorist threat.

This is one of those discussions where I think that those of us who regard the threat as very serious should say to those of you who are rather more optimistic than ourselves that we hope you're proved right.

At the same time, I think it is fair to ask those who disagree at least to be open to the possibility that we might be closer to the truth than you.

As Tony Blair, George Bush and quite a few others have learnt from Saddam and his missing Weapons of Mass Destruction in recent months, people who proclaim that they "know" the truth can't always be confident of being proved right a few months down the road.

Wherever we might each stand on the nature of the terrorist threat, I hope that there is one issue on which we can agree. Global terrorism is but one of the factors leading to a greater concentration of power in the hands of a small number of people at the top of governments.

Committed though we might be to democracy, and power being shared more widely, let us at least be realistic about the nature of the distribution of power. On the critical challenges that we now face, real power is concentrated in the hands of relatively few people.

We might wish that it were different, but that's the reality, and there is every sign that this process of power becoming evermore concentrated will continue in the future.

This is one of the reasons why the character of our top leaders is so important.

Most of us, I am sure, didn't know much about John Kerry until a few weeks ago. But we now know that if the American people elect him as their President in November, from that moment onwards all of our futures will depend to some degree on his personal integrity.

That's quite a thought.

Summing up

I have tried to sketch out a vision of how our democracies might draw on the value of trust to inspire them in the next stage of their development.

I am conscious that many big questions remain unanswered.

However, where I do feel confident is in asserting that one of the central political challenges that we must all face is to do with the scale of the distrust that so undermines our democracies.

Ultimately, the only adequate response can be to replace this culture of distrust with a culture of trust.

If this could be achieved, it might just provide the key to a new world order, since it would make possible a more honest and open dialogue between governments and governed than most of us have ever countenanced.

I think that the vision needs to be pretty ambitious, because the obstacles in our way are immense.

In those countries carrying the burden of the worst systemic corruption, many people have lost such faith in their political system that they now view it as virtually unreformable. They would first need to be persuaded that a hightrust political system is actually a possibility, and not just another manoeuvre to shore up a corrupt system of government.

In our advanced democracies, these sorts of ideas would immediately encounter the mixture of cynicism and complacency that already so undermines the quality of our democratic way of life. To survive that encounter, we would need to flesh out in much greater detail how these ideas might change the language and conduct of day-to-day politics.

In responding to the growing challenges of corruption and distrust, we can jump basically one of two ways:

1. One way is to emphasise legal and structural constraints on politicians and all other key decision-makers, in order to check corruption as early and quickly as possible. To a large extent, this institutional route represents the current consensus position, especially in Asia.

My main objection to this route is that it can so easily reinforce the already widely held view that all politicians are crooks who can't be trusted. People will ask the question, "*If they're not all rotten, why are we treating them all as if they could be?*"

Moreover, it does nothing to attract people of higher integrity into politics. If anything, it encourages parents who are ambitious for their children to advise them that there are lots of worthwhile things they could do, and if they want to keep out of trouble politics is something that they would be well advised to avoid.

2. The other option would be to plump for what I described earlier on as a cultural strategy that concentrates first and foremost on trying to populate the body politic with more people of integrity.

Of course, this doesn't stand as a direct alternative to the institutional option, and could well sit alongside it, although I think that if you go for the cultural route you really need to make sure that the messages that are being conveyed are consistent.

At heart, this option involves a strong act of faith, in believing that our democratic societies could elect a sufficient number of ethical and committed leaders ambitious to fill the top leadership positions, and committed to exercising their leadership in a spirit of openness and trust.

The difficulties associated with this cultural approach are great, and it would be easy to volunteer to give a talk for a lot longer than this one on all that could go wrong. It's always easier to talk about the problems, and the negatives. But what I want to hold out something of a vision of how our countries might develop truly long-term strategies towards the corruption and distrust that now eat away at our democracies.

In October 2004 the Heads of State of the countries of ASEAN and the European Union are coming together as the Asia-Europe Meeting, in Hanoi. I hope that they might then agree to promote a wider debate about how we could develop a higher trust culture in the relationship between the peoples and governments of Asia and Europe, and between governments themselves.

It would be such a natural evolution of their current dialogue about our cultures and civilizations, which the Asia-Europe Foundation has done so much to take forward.

Very finally, I think it's worth reminding ourselves that this discussion about trust goes back a long way. Some of the best words come from Confucius, in the advice that he gave his disciple Tze-kung, in which he said that of the three most important things needed for government - *"weapons, food and trust"* - it is trust that should be guarded to the end.

And why should trust be guarded to the end? Because, said Confucius, *"without trust we can not stand"*. ””