

Speech of Baroness Symons in Doha 6th forum for

Democracy, development and free trade

Sixth Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free Trade

Your Highness,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Colleagues

It is a great privilege, and an enormous pleasure to address you, a very distinguished and expert audience, at this opening of the 6th Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free Trade.

May I also say how delighted I am to be back in Qatar, and particularly here in Doha, which has become a byword for hospitality and wonderful conference facilities.

Your Highness, thank you very much for the splendid arrangements which have been made for this conference – and, through you, may we thank all those who have worked so hard to bring this about. The conference is beautifully presented and at the same time warm, welcoming and very hospitable.

Your Highness, I can think of no better venue for an international gathering to discuss democracy, development and free trade. It was in this city that the World Trade Organization launched the Doha Development Round; trade talks on the vital necessity of how we can do most to ensure that Free Trade is also Fair Trade; fair to developing countries, and fair in encouraging real and sustainable development for the future. We all know how those talks have been very difficult, but the very fact that development is a key issue is vitally important.

Qatar is also an excellent example of a country developing its own democratic institutions, strengthening civil society and empowering women, whilst maintaining a strong sense of its own identity, culture and future.

Qatar is an outward-reaching, completely Arab State for the 21st Century.

We wish Qatar well in its role as a member of the United Nations Security Council, and look forward to its contribution on the huge regional issues; Iraq, Iran, Sudan and of course the Middle East Peace Process.

It is also, entirely appropriate for us to be tackling this very challenging agenda, here in the Middle East Region. This region is of vital importance to us in the United Kingdom, to Europe, the world economy and global business. It is fundamental to the world's energy security, containing, as it does, so much of the world's known oil and gas.

And the region is a major trading partner – we in the United Kingdom have long recognized its importance – and last year, the UK imported over £7 billion worth of goods from the region, and exported more than £12 billion worth – a growth of a stunning 30% in trade over the previous year.

Increases in trade build prosperity, enhance opportunities for investment, and stimulate growth. But trade does so much more than that. Trade facilitates investment in the great public services which people everywhere – in every country need and deserve.

Growth in education, health, housing, transport and welfare. Investment in the future is what we see so clearly here in Qatar – and in a number of other Gulf countries, and increasingly elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa Region.

Of course, this is helped by the increase in oil prices, which have added an extra £250 billion in revenues in the last four years in the GCC countries. What has changed, and continues to develop, is the way in which these revenues have helped to finance significant public sector investment programmes, and to generate considerable liquidity for private sector investment around the region.

Your Highness, I am sure that Qatar would be the first to recognize that the region has still not reached its potential. Investment is high in oil and gas, but it remains relatively low in other parts of many of the economies of the region. Qatar, like the UAE and other Gulf States are diversifying your economies, and that diversification is vital for the future and needs to spread throughout the region.

Global investment is moving, but more needs to be done. We all know the figures: youth unemployment is high. The World Bank calculates it is about 50% in the region, and 100 million jobs are needed to be created over the next 15-20 years if the situation is to stabilize, and then improve.

So diversification in economics, coupled with investment for future generations, is of paramount importance to build a lasting sustainability and security for the future. But partnership must be for the long term – investors must be prepared to endure the hard times as well as the good. We in Europe and our transatlantic partners have a vital role in building these partnerships – as was demonstrated last month in Marrakech, at the meeting of trade ministers from the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership – we hope this will lead to full liberalization of trade between the EU and Arab Mediterranean by 2010, and we look forward to the conclusion of an EU/GCC Free Trade Agreement.

The Middle East North Africa OECD investment programme is another good example of practical reform which coupled with the United Nations Arab Human Development report written, by people from the region, provide policy frameworks within which we can all work together in partnership. And I commend too the G8 Middle East North Africa Forum for the Future, which was ground-breaking in the meeting held in Bahrain in September, putting real financial backing into work on supporting democracy and civic participation, as well as encouraging entrepreneurs and the growth of small and medium sized businesses, and this evening we have heard from His Highness further about Qatar's contribution to the agenda on democracy.

Those of us from the Western democracies have a real responsibility in this respect. We need to recognize that these changes cannot be imposed from outside the region. They must come from within it. And we need to remember too that every country in this region is different. Every bit as different from each other as we in Europe are difference from each other, and from our friends across the Atlantic. So our responsibility has to be to form partnerships – real partnerships to answer these challenges and recognize that broad based, fundamental and integrated changes are necessary, but may well be different in each country. One size really does not fit all.

Moreover, we cannot exhort other countries to move towards democratic reform and then refuse to acknowledge the outcome of the very democratic change we advocate. And the fact is that almost every country in the region is introducing more democratic dialogue, greater enfranchisement of both men and women, and encouraging the growth of civil society and its voluntary sectors.

We shall be discussing these developments over the next two days reviewing the very real Arab based reform which has taken place, and considering how best that may develop in the future.

Those of us who live in the older Western democracies know just how imperfect those democracies are – and we also have a development process of our own to consider and much to learn. No one has a monopoly on wisdom. We know too that without the twin rocks of the rule of law and human rights democracies can become the tyranny of the majority over the minority, and a license to undermine the very human rights and civil liberties which we have taken so long to develop.

So the three go hand in hand.

Democracy, the rule of law, and human rights all three are vital components and have to be supported by sound economies, sustained by free and fair trade.

Democracy, the rule of law and human rights are also all interdependent. Our agenda here in Doha recognizes that all these components are crucial.

Each country has to find its own way forward, but we do depend on each other – for our prosperity in trade, and our international security. The 21st Century is very different from the 20th Century – perhaps we are all learning at last that international cooperation is the key for all of us in securing a better future.

Thank you, Your Highness for all your generosity and commitment to this forum. I wish it well.