

The European Wergeland Centre, Inauguration Ceremony, Oslo, 29 May 2009.

“Building bridges: Education for Intercultural Understanding, Human Rights and Democratic Citizenship, from Policy to Practice”

Keynote address by Jonas Gahr Støre, Minister of Foreign Affairs

The Minister’s speech was based on the following points.

Check against delivery.

Your Royal Highness, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

- It is an honour for me to take part in the inauguration of the European Wergeland Centre. As the other speakers have outlined, the centre shall promote education for intercultural understanding, human rights and democratic citizenship. – Three pillars of modern society.
- The Norwegian Government is honoured to cooperate with the Council on establishing this institution here in Oslo. My hope is that the Centre will become – firstly – a leading institution for knowledge production, training, research and network building. And secondly – a centre for dissemination of information and best practices in these important areas I mentioned.
- It is also a particular pleasure for me that the centre is named after the Norwegian poet – as well as “activist” and “human rights defender” in modern terms – Henrik Wergeland. Last year we celebrated the 200th anniversary of his birth. Wergeland built the Norwegian nation – and “invented” our National Day – but more importantly, he fought untiringly throughout his life for religious tolerance, freedom through knowledge and education, and equality between nations and social classes. More than anything, he raised the flag of humanity. He was a true child of the European Enlightenment – even literally – he compared humankind to “precious stones” with “an inner light”.

- In the spirit of Henrik Wergeland, his ideals and today's inauguration of the centre, I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some thoughts about dialogue in international politics.
- We live in a globalised, interdependent world, and dialogue between nations, peoples, generations and religions is essential. Dialogue can foster social inclusion. Dialogue can appreciate diversity. And dialogue can lead to peaceful resolution of conflicts.
- Mr Thorbjørn Jagland, the President of the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) – and the next Secretary General of the Council of Europe, I hope! – put it eloquently when he spoke about European values and traditions, Europe's dark chapters, and “Europe has been to hell” – World War II, Mr Jagland said, which reminds of an American senator who once said that about the UN that this organisation “is not created to take us to heaven – but to prevent us from going to hell”. (By the way – it makes sense – logically, that the European Wergeland Centre in a few months will be located next to the Holocaust Research and Knowledge Centre (HL-senteret) at Villa Grande, Bygdøy).
- My reflections with you this morning will focus on other European key values and traditions – when Europe is at its best: Dealing with differences through dialogue: In intercultural understanding, human rights, democratic citizenship. Between nations, within nations. Dialogue. “To talk or not to talk”.
- We know that dialogue does not come by itself – not automatically. Education. We must communicate the effects and methods of dialogue.
- Dialogue must be the key method for managing differences and the complexity of globalisation:
- Clashes of civilization. Differences of cultures. Bridging gaps between rich and poor. Globally: Between states.

- But globalisation takes also place within our societies – as they become more diverse – more rights-bound – and going through tough changes. Do we have the means to manage differences and complexity?
- By the way, I read a book yesterday by Dominique Moisi “The Geopolitics of Emotions. How Fear, Humiliation and Hope are Reshaping the World”. About human dignity. How to create confidence, how to deal with disputes. Also of relevance for the Norwegian society.
- Six reflections – on dialogue (in international relations):
- First – dialogue does not mean giving up fundamental values and principles.
- Dialogue is not acceptance – but respect.
- It is important to maintain and use the channels of communication when tension is low; which means investing in these channels, keep them open, in order to be prepared when tension gets higher. Inter-religious dialogue. Inter-cultural dialogue.
- Engaging in dialogue signifies trust in our own values and principles: being open for dialogue increases ability to persuade.
- There is always an option to walk away. The Durban II – conference, Geneva in March-April. Norway stayed – our strength. We managed to conclude with a document.
- Second – dialogue means seizing the middle ground.
- It is easy to seize the extremes.
- Then it would be: either with us or against us. The extremes take over all too often – defining the standards.

- After 9/11: reduced space for peaceful engagement. Demonizing effect. Demonizing “the others”. The opposite of dialogue is monologue. We have to break this logic. 9/11 changed the international debate on how to resolve conflict. In my view, it reduced the space for peaceful engagement, dialogue and the use of political tools in the fight against terrorism, extremism and violence. It produced a confrontational language, a language with terms that focused on “us” and “them”; either you are “with us” or “against us”.
- It challenges the dominance of the extremes. Dialogue and discussions help to build confidence. This is exactly what politics and democracy is all about: engagement, finding and seizing the middle ground, the common ground, counteracting the extremes, the extremists, and refusing let extremist views dominate the field of play.
- Third – and consequently – we have to support and create arenas for dialogue. The community. International cooperation. The EU. Handling issues around the negotiation table and not through war and conflict. We need to revitalise the Council of Europe.
- Domestic level: schools, at work etc. Where differences can meet and confront.
- Such channels and arenas of communication need public funding.
- Education and culture: possible to reach and use, easier than diplomatic channels.
Culture: values and traditions. Not dialogue through microphones.
- Fourth – include the excluded:
- Internationally: Non-state actors. Domestically: all the groups without access, access to communication? Faith. Engage them. Debate. New ways of dialogue.
- Fifth – the key: freedom of expression.

- Henrik Wergeland. He asked – in his poetic language: can the source of the spirit, the flight of thought, bear to be restrained? Wergeland knew the value of freedom of expression and the press which he called “the most precious diamond in the people’s diadem”. The right to freedom of expression was set out in paragraph 100 of Norway’s Constitution of 1814.
- Freedom of expression. Full stop. No restricted. But: speech instigating hatred.
- Freedom of expression has to co-exist with other fundamental rights. Responsibility.
- For us to manage differences. Informed citizens. Education.
- Sixth – dialogue as the language of reconciliation. Truth.
- South Africa. Mandela. Could have chosen war. Now, today, Afghanistan and the Middle East.

- All this and much more could be in focus for the European Wergeland Centre. Education – and the value of dialogue – in the spirit of Henrik Wergeland. Education and cultural exchange can counteract stereotyped images. It can prevent or reduce prejudice, racism and xenophobia. It can foster mutual awareness and understanding. To put it plainly: education and cultural encounters can – and do – build bridges. Wergeland himself believed in the future and in the power of good. He was an optimist on the world’s behalf. – Thank you for your attention – and good luck!