

Opening of the European Wergeland Centre

Oslo, 29 May 2009

Thorbjorn Jagland, President of the Storting

Your Royal Highness,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Dear friends,

It is a great honour for me to join you here today in Oslo, to mark the occasion of the inauguration of The European Wergeland Centre.

To be, or not to be: that was the question. In 1950, approximately 350 years after Hamlet uttered these famous words, the Council of Europe defined what "to be" should mean in post-war Europe.

It meant that any European individual should have universal rights through The European Human Rights Convention. 59 years later, this convention is more fundamental than ever before.

The European human rights community is the basis of a unique humanistic culture of civilization.

In Europe, society exists for the sake of the individual. Not the other way around. This is the essence of our democracies. No European state can use its citizens as tools for religious or political ideologies. These are our fundamental values. They go beyond the individual country's national cultural characteristics, and they bind us together. That is the heart of Europe.

Today, we see that religions, cultures and traditions are clashing in the public sphere. All over Europe the integration debate is becoming a question of "them" versus "us". It is becoming a question of conflict, not integration. That is when we need to understand what our true common values are. What binds us together, instead of what divides us.

Some thought that the end of the Cold War would lead to final liberation from ideologies and conflict. But what we have seen is people seeking to find their identity in religion or ethnic groups.

"No one can be free without belonging", wrote the Norwegian sociologist Stein Ringen. The wish to belong is a fundamental human characteristic. But it is also a sad fact that many only find their identity when it is based on antagonism towards other groups.

The clash of interests between groups, religions or ideologies often involves irrationality. Once, Europe became so irrational that it classified the Jews as a major threat. In the end Europe itself became the victim of its own absurdity. That is why, today, as we become ever more diverse, we must work harder to unite around our common values and our common humanity.

And that is why the Wergeland Centre will be important to all of us in promoting democratic culture and social belonging. It is about us. It affects us.

And it is a tribute to Henrik Wergeland, an advocate of enlightenment, democracy, and freedom of faith and expression. And notably a strong voice in speaking out against discrimination of the Jews. Wergeland's beliefs were crucial to Norwegian nation-building, as they were in nations throughout Europe.

However, Europe was evolving around nationalism, and nationalism in the 19th and 20th Century divided nations.

In the 21st Century, his beliefs transcend the pride of a nation state. Today, they are fundamental in uniting nations, and here at the Wergeland Centre they are part of the great European democratic project. Indeed, Henrik Wergeland would in 2009 have been a true European.

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Dante once wrote "The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis". The basis of modern Europe is our common values. Europe has been to hell. Now most people recognize it as a place of heaven. We owe this transformation to the vigorous leaders of post-war Europe.

They saw further than national self-interest. They created a European community of humanity, peace and stability. And they paved the way for a European identity we can all connect to – whether or not we are members of the EU. We are Europeans.

Now we must work to develop this unique political construction further. As we are doing here today, by opening the European Wergeland Centre.

Congratulations and thank you.