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RUNNYMEDE COLLEGE

Delight, Ornament, Ability

Dear Pupils, Parents, Teachers and Staff

As my brother has explained, I started out in life as a historian, and therefore basically lived in the past.

However, 25 years ago I became a think tanker, and today I mainly worry about the present and the future. But I remain a historian at heart.

Today I would therefore like to talk to you about THREE interrelated issues that I have been observing lately, which combine the past, the present and the future, namely:
- And what the 250th anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence can still teach us.
- The changes experienced by the international system;
- The impact of Artificial Intelligence;

Since I am a still a historian at heart, I would like to wrap up with some final thoughts on an anniversary that we should be celebrating this year, which has received far less attention than I had expected.

I am referring to the 250th anniversary (or semiquincentennial) of the American Declaration of Independence, a document which remains extremely relevant today, as King Charles III reminded us in his remarkable speech to the US Congress in April.

(Incidentally, I suppose many of you noticed that when HM the King referred to Magna Carta, he reminded his audience that it was signed at Runnymede in 1215).

The most famous part of the Declaration of Independence is the opening of its second paragraph, written primarily by Thomas Jefferson in 1776. It reads:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”.

This passage is famous because it expresses the Declaration’s central political philosophy:
The notion that human equality is a fundamental principle;
The idea that governments derive their authority from the consent of the governed.
The belief that natural rights are sacred, and that governments cannot legitimately deprive anyone of them;

The phrase ‘Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness’ is often regarded as one of the most influential statements of democratic ideals ever written.

The phrase, of course, did not originate entirely with Thomas Jefferson.

It draws on a long tradition of Enlightenment political philosophy, especially the work of the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), with whom some of you are particularly familiar!
Locke argued that people possess natural rights to 'Life, Liberty, and Property'.

In his Second Treatise of Government (1689), he also stressed that governments are created to protect these rights, and that citizens may replace governments that fail to do so.
Jefferson clearly borrowed Locke's framework, but he substituted 'the pursuit of happiness' for 'property'.

Historians have advanced several explanations as to why he did this:

1. He may have favoured a broader concept of human flourishing, since Enlightenment thinkers understood 'happiness' to mean living a virtuous and fulfilling life, not merely pleasure.
2. Jefferson was familiar with philosophers such as the Scottish author Francis Hutcheson, who had written about a natural right to pursue happiness.
3. Finally, 'property' may have sounded too narrow or materialistic, while the 'pursuit of happiness' encompassed a wider range of human aspirations.

Whatever the case, the result became one of the most famous formulations of individual rights in political history.

As a historian, I find it fascinating, though not entirely surprising, that it should have been a king, and not an elected politician, who was best able to remind the US Congress of the importance of the rule of law, of the checks and balances embedded in the US Constitution, and of the ultimate power (and even beauty) of democracy and its institutions.

I was particularly moved when he stressed that 'in both of our countries, it is the very fact of our vibrant, diverse and free societies that gives us our collective strength, including to support victims of some of the ills that, so tragically, exist in both our societies today'.

America matters to us, amongst many other reasons, because it has been at the heart of the international system since the end of WWII.

Although it remains a crucial player, in recent years it has ceased to be the dependable ally it once was, let alone the 'indispensable nation' that Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once referred to.

Partly as result of this, experts do not even agree as to how we should describe the current international order.

Some see it as a bipolar world, dominated by two superpowers: the US and China.
When presidents Donald Trump and Xi-Jinping met recently in Beijing, that was undoubtedly the implicit message they wished to convey.

However, this does not make me feel particularly comfortable: the US under Trump has decided it no longer wants to be a benevolent hegemon, one which largely created the so-called liberal international order after WWII.

And China, which is of course a deeply authoritarian, repressive regime, would like to mould the international system in its own image.

I would argue that things are more complicated, and that the China/US rivalry does not tell the whole story.

Indeed, I believe we are rapidly transitioning towards a multipolar world, in which medium-sized powers such as India, Japan, South Korea, Canada or Australia will play an increasingly prominent role.

The European Union is also a significant player in this game.

It has become fashionable to criticise and belittle the EU, but we should not forget that our 450 million inhabitants, who only represent 6% of the world's population, generate 18% of global wealth, still ahead of China's 16%.

Sadly, some European leaders forget that, as the Belgian politician Paul-Henri Spaak once famously said, 'there are only two kinds of states in Europe: small states, and small states that have not yet realized they are small'.

I mention this because it is becoming increasingly clear that the EU will only be relevant in the international system if it speaks with a single voice.

Incidentally, this is also one of the many reasons why I regret Brexit, and why I hope the UK will one day rejoin the EU.

Many people don't know that the EU has an official motto: 'united in diversity'.

This reminds me of the motto of the USA: 'e pluribus unum' (out of many, one).
The EU's motto is undoubtedly powerful, but sadly, it is still more of an aspiration than a reality.

The other debate that keeps the International Relations think tank community awake at night concerns the future of the rules-based liberal international order which was established at the end of WWII; or to put it differently, the future of multilateralism.

Although this order undoubtedly generated some remarkable institutions, which have served us very well in the past, many of them are no longer performing the tasks for which they were designed.

For example, the World Trade Organization, which succeeded the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, founded in 1948, once helped to manage and regulate international trade and commerce, to prevent them from being weaponized. Sadly, today it has become increasingly irrelevant.

Similarly, the political institutions of the liberal order, most notably the United Nations and its agencies, are frequently sidelined and ignored by the great powers (and even by many small ones), and often fail to prevent major conflicts, such as those currently raging in Ukraine and parts of the Middle East.

But merely feeling nostalgic about the demise of the rules-based international order and multilateral institutions will not get us very far.

In January this year, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney gave a major speech arguing that the post–Cold War order is breaking down, and that countries need to stop pretending otherwise. Carney argued that the old system -largely underwritten by American power- provided benefits such as open trade, financial stability, and collective security, but that it always contained contradictions and was applied unevenly.

In fact, many poor and developing nations (the so-called 'global South') did not really benefit from it. He added that many countries tolerated those inconsistencies because the system was predictable and broadly advantageous. According to Carney, that bargain no longer works.

Instead, he acknowledged that today's world is one of intensifying great-power rivalry, where larger states increasingly use: trade as leverage, financial systems as tools of coercion, supply chains as strategic weapons, and economic interdependence for geopolitical advantage.

A major theme of his speech was something I mentioned earlier, namely the growing role of middle powers: countries like Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and many European states. Carney argued that they should cooperate more closely, rather than compete individually for favour from larger powers.

His most memorable phrase on that point was: "Middle powers must act together because if we are not sitting at the table, we will end up on the menu".

In keeping with this, he called for: greater strategic autonomy, something the EU is trying to develop; diversified trade relationships; new coalitions based on shared interests and values; ie 'likemindedness'; but also, and very importantly, a more realistic view of international politics.

The whole point of multilateral institutions, of course, is that they should assist us in responding to the major challenges facing humanity. One of these, undoubtedly, is the impact Artificial Intelligence will have on all of us, regardless of where we live, what we do for a living, or even how old we are.

And since Pope Leo XIV will be arriving in Madrid tomorrow, I thought I might encourage you to read the first encyclical of his papacy, entitled Magnifica Humanitas ("Magnificent Humanity"), which is the Catholic Church's first statement on how humanity should respond to AI.

Significantly, its subtitle is "On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence." The central argument of this papal encyclical is simple:

AI is a powerful, indeed spectacular human achievement, and one we should celebrate, but it must remain a tool serving human dignity, freedom, truth, work, and the common good—not a force that dominates society or redefines what it means to be human.

The Pope makes several interesting points, which I think most of us can share, regardless of our religious beliefs, if we have any religious beliefs, namely:

1. That human beings are more than just intelligence-processing machines.
Pope Leo XIV insists that AI can analyse data, predict, generate language, and imitate reasoning, but it does not possess consciousness, moral responsibility, love, wisdom, or spiritual dignity. Humans remain unique because they have these attributes.

2. That technology is not evil—but it is never neutral
The encyclical explicitly rejects both techno-utopianism and technophobia.
Technology is described as a genuinely human creation that can improve life, but every technology reflects the values and interests of those who build and control it.

3. That the greatest danger is that AI could lead to an unhealthy concentration of power; it may place enormous power in the hands of governments, in some cases, or a small number of tech

corporations, in others, or even in both simultaneously. The Pope warns us that whoever controls advanced AI could shape culture, economics, and even moral assumptions on a global scale.

4. That work is not merely aimed at generating income, but is a source of human meaning and participation in society. In other words, work has dignity beyond the economic benefits it produces. The Pope is also concerned that large-scale automation could create new forms of exclusion and inequality, if societies do not protect their vulnerable and less privileged members, allowing them to share the benefits of technological progress.

5. The document also worries that truth may be endangered by AI-generated information, leading to misinformation, manipulation, and the erosion of trust. It argues that a society unable to distinguish truth from fabrication becomes vulnerable to political domination and social fragmentation. In an age of unprincipled populists of different ideological tendencies, this is a major danger.

6. The Pope also stresses that AI should never make life-and-death decisions
One of the encyclical's strongest warnings concerns autonomous weapons, an issue with which some Armed Forces are already grappling. Leo XIV argues that delegating lethal force to machines weakens moral accountability and risks making war more frequent, less restrained, and perversely, more acceptable.

7. The encyclical concludes that the answer to technological disruption is not merely regulation but a renewed commitment to solidarity, human relationships, democratic accountability, and moral responsibility.

Our goal should be a society where technology serves people, not one in which people adapt themselves to technology.

Dear Pupils, Parents, Teachers and Staff of Runnymede College.

I started my talk stressing the undying appeal of the Declaration of Independence, which partly explains why many of us continue to see the US as a beacon of freedom, democracy, and personal dignity, despite the difficulties it is currently undergoing.

As I said a few minutes ago, we live in a complex, uncertain, even dangerous world.

I prefer to see it as multipolar world rather than a bipolar world, which would perhaps run the risk of replicating the toxic tensions and hatreds of the past.

I have discussed the weakening of the multilateral, rules-based international order, which was a great-post WWII invention, and largely an American one.

Finally, I have also drawn your attention to the challenges posed by AI, and how humanity might respond to them.

All of this to say that it is precisely in times such as these that we must look back at our collective history, to identify the values and principles that are truly worth defending and living for today, so that we may move forward with renewed confidence and hope in he future.

Many thanks for your patience.