



Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen; distinguished guests, delegates, teachers; and, above all, our students. A very warm welcome to Runnymede and to this year's Model United Nations Conference.

We had hoped to welcome Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo as our keynote speaker. Unfortunately, an important vote on housing legislation has required her to remain in Parliament. We are sorry not to have her with us, but a conference devoted to diplomacy and democratic institutions can hardly complain about an elected representative attending to her parliamentary responsibilities. El País Cayetana has very graciously said that we will be better off with Charles Powell. Someone did point out that Charles does not have a million followers on Instagram.

I am pleased to say that this is not yet a requirement for speaking at Runnymede.

Our keynote speaker, Dr Charles Powell, is a distinguished historian and Director of the Real Instituto Elcano. He studied at Oxford, where he obtained his doctorate and subsequently held teaching and research positions. His work on Spain's transition to democracy and its international relations makes him particularly well qualified to address this gathering. Elcano Royal Institute

He is also an Old Runnymedian and my brother, which makes welcoming him a particular pleasure. Charles Powell

When Cayetana spoke at our Prize Giving two years ago, she urged our pupils to build their lives around truth, merit and courage. She encouraged them to question, to cross-check, to verify, and to resist the comfort of received opinion.

Those are habits that a historian will recognise. They are also precisely the habits that this conference should encourage.

Because MUN asks more of you than simply having opinions.

It asks you to test them. To marshal facts. To understand the position of someone with whom you may profoundly disagree. To argue, negotiate, persuade — and, occasionally, compromise. And that takes us back to the question of why the United Nations exists at all.

Its Charter was written by a generation that had seen what happens when argument gives way to force and law becomes subordinate to power. Its opening words express a determination "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". They affirm human dignity, fundamental rights, respect for international law and the need to live together in peace. United Nations

Those principles were ambitious in 1945. They remain ambitious today.

The international order built after the Second World War has always been imperfect. The United Nations itself has often fallen short of the ideals proclaimed in its Charter.

But behind that order lies an enormously important principle: that relations between states should be governed, as far as possible, not simply by who possesses the greatest power, but by rules, institutions, negotiation and law.

Those same principles matter within democracies.



Democracy is not merely about winning. Nor is Parliament simply an inconvenience placed in the way of governments. Democratic institutions exist precisely because power needs scrutiny and restraint.

Parliament, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, a free press and the right to disagree are not obstacles to democracy. They make democracy possible. And none of them should be taken for granted.

Democratic life can be weakened from within: by deliberate falsehood and misinformation; by an intolerance that seeks to silence an argument rather than answer it; and by forms of populism, on both left and right, that reduce extraordinarily complicated questions to a contest between a virtuous “us” and a wicked “them”.

That is the opposite of what you will be asked to do here.

Freedom of speech is meaningful only if it includes a willingness to hear from people with whom we disagree. That does not require us to admire every argument, still less to accept it. It requires us to answer arguments with better arguments; bad information with facts; prejudice with reason; and slogans with thought.

Over the next few days, many of you will find yourselves defending the interests of countries whose governments or policies you would never personally support.

That is part of the exercise. Understanding a position is not the same as endorsing it. But without understanding it, you have little prospect of challenging it effectively — or negotiating anything worthwhile.

You will have to listen before replying, distinguish evidence from assertion, and be prepared to reconsider an argument when the facts do not support it.

There is no loss of intellectual independence in changing your mind for a good reason. The loss comes when you allow others to do your thinking for you.

These habits — curiosity, respect for facts, intellectual courage and the ability to disagree without regarding one another as enemies — are the habits on which both diplomacy and democracy depend.

They are also part of what we mean by an education.

Charles, thank you for joining us at such short notice and for bringing your scholarship and experience to this conference.

Delegates, I hope you will argue vigorously, listen carefully and leave with a better understanding not only of the world, but also of one another.

Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to welcome Dr Charles Powell.