



**Transcript of Professor Sir Roger Scruton's closing address  
Margaret Thatcher Conference on Security  
Guildhall, London  
Tuesday 27 June 2017**

The video recording of this panel is available on the [CPS YouTube channel](#).

Roger Scruton: It falls to me to bring this great conference to an end. I'm pleased to see that most of you have left already, so my shame will not be witnessed by everybody. But for us, I must give thanks, of course, to Catherine McGuinness of the Corporation of the City of London for the generous use of the Guild Hall and to Lord Saatchi for having put together this extraordinary event with so many intelligent and alarming people who have carried forward into our times, the memory of the great Lady Thatcher whose, I suppose the most important attribute from our point of view, is that she would never address a gathering without saying something positive, not only about them, but also, about herself and the country which she led. And we are short of positive messages and I'm going to try, just in the brief time available, to conjure one from the depths of my own despair.

We live in volatile times. That is obvious. And Henry Kissinger reminded us this morning that the whole geo-political situation has changed radically and he recommended that a policy of co-evolution rather than confrontation. Something that was endorsed by Lord Richards and Lord Robertson, later. And we've seen from what Sir Richard Barrons has just told us, that our own government and the governments of Europe, are not really focused on the changed situation, from the military point of view, from the defence point of view, in which we all exist. Other people have reminded us of problems that have not been fully digested and perhaps we can't fully digest. In particular, the internet and what it has done, not only to our sense of communication with each other, but also, to the focus of attention of young people today.

Anne Applebaum mentioned this in particular, the fact that young people are no longer, judged the world in terms of hierarchies of decision, but rather in terms of networks through which they are linked to their peers. They're not so interested in being judged by those who are superior to themselves but put themselves always in contact with those whom they can trust to be as ignorant as themselves.

This makes for a very easy-going life. But, of course, also jeopardises many of the things that we hold precious. We also have had quite a lot of discussion of Islam and our relations with the Islamic world and how we deal with the fact that living among us are substantial minorities who do not identify with those things that we think are definitive of our social, political, and moral inheritance. That is something, again, which I think we're only just beginning to wake up to and do not yet have a coherent policy to deal with.



But in the light, in confronting all these things, there's one great question, which I think has been in the back of everybody's mind today, which is the question of identity. Who are we? What is the meaning of that word "we"? What holds us together as a first-person plural, and people who are prepared, perhaps, to make sacrifices for each other to exist together and bound by reciprocal duties? That's a great question that I think has come before us in these volatile times and the fact that it's in everybody's mind, has been revealed in the recent elections, not only here, not only in the Brexit vote, but, of course, in America and France, also, and in Italy. And the answer to this question, "Who are we?" is, obviously, part of the fundamental structure of our social existence and there are many false answers. And this has been touched on today, in particular by Bishop Chartres and Rabbi Sacks.

We can try to identify ourselves in terms of an enemy. If we can evoke an enemy who we can combine against, then that, at least, will give us the kind of unity that we need and perhaps we can then set together behind the leader who'll take us on a great march into the future against this enemy. Doesn't have to be a concrete enemy, it can be something abstract like the infidel or capitalism. And the great leader can stand up on a podium in Nuremberg, for instance, or at Glastonbury, even. And the lights of everybody's aspirations will turn upon him. But that kind of negative unity, which is the default's position, in my view of human beings, when troubled by the question of identity. That negative position is not what we are here to discover or to celebrate and I want to say something affirmative by way of conclusion.

I don't think that our identity, the identity of the British people, is to be condensed into a slogan or represented on a banner. I think it consists in a quiet confidence in what we are and in our values. And that that confidence still exists even if we are, being British, very reluctant to make a song and dance about it.

Rabbi Sacks, of whom I'm very proud because he was a student of mine at Cambridge, made a very important distinction between two concepts of right. That the French revolutionary concept, in which rights are granted to by the state and they are the great goal of the revolutionary project, and the Anglo Saxon, Anglophone version. The common law version, in other words, of a right, in which rights arise, not from the state, but from civil society. They arise from below. They are the by-product of our freedom and the reciprocal duties that bind us and what makes it possible that we can define our rights in that way, because I think we do, and that's the binding principal, in a way, of our society. It's that we actually have a conception, an unspoken conception, but a conception nevertheless, of our duty towards each other.

If you look at the monuments of the Duke of Wellington there, three little words are engraved upon it specifying the values for which he stood. Wisdom, duty, and honour. You won't find those words inscribed on a monument now, you might find, "Rights, claims, and benefits." Or something.



But you certainly won't find something quite so self-denying and obligation incurring. But nevertheless, we do still retain those values. And I think we can see this in the contrasting responses to the terrible fire that took place in Kensington the other day.

Immediately, that it occurred, people rushed out into the street to take charge of the situation, to offer their services, to do what they could out of a sense of duty and at whatever cost to themselves. That's what one means by duty and honour.

Then, of course, along came the politicians to declare a day of rage in order to exploit this situation to advance their own agenda. That is the other conception of the right. The right that is imposed by the state, that leads us in to the future behind a great banner. And I think we're at a stage in the development of our society where we can see the radical contrast between those two things. It's very easy to unite people behind a great banner of progress with all the goals specified upon it. It's much more difficult to unite them behind the kind of politics that have been characteristic of this nation throughout the modern world. You can't hold up a banner which says "Hesitation". You know? Who's going to unite behind that? And yet, that is precisely what is so good, in my view, about our political inheritance. That we consider always the other. We consider those that disagree with us. We try to resolve conflicts by negotiation. This is the democratic spirit and it's the expression in political life of neighbour love. In other words, the second great commandment that was given to us 2000 years ago.

I think that should be the thing that we are still going to propagate to the world, and attach ourselves to. The democratic spirit that enables us to treat the other with whom we disagree, with equal respect to our friends. Thank you.