

SPEECH AT THE SUFFOLK MEMORIAL WEERT by Mr John Swanson

Weert - 22ND SEPTEMBER 2019

Mr Mayor, Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning

It is a privilege to be with you this morning - to share your celebration of liberation – thank you for inviting me

My father was the pilot of a Halifax bomber which crashed near Maaseikerweg 75 years ago tomorrow

He and two of his crew members lost their lives

Their graves are in Molenpoort Cemetery here in Weert

I never knew my father – I was born 3 months after his death.

So when I was 17 years old I decided to come to Weert - to his grave.

That was in 1962 - 57 years ago. Since then I've been a regular visitor and have made many friends and acquaintances here.

I have to admit that I'm inclined to take my freedom for granted

I don't think about it every day - Probably like most of you

For all of my life, I've lived in a free country - I've known nothing else.

But each time I come to visit my father's grave, I am vividly reminded of the perils and futility of war

And - how important it is to remember those who died so that we could be free.

On my trips to Weert, I've learned that there's an added dynamic to how you and the people of the Netherlands think about your freedom.

There's a difference – and that difference is your experience of occupation

I've seen the photographs of the Nazi Commander on the steps of the Town Hall in Weert – with subjugated citizens looking on

I've seen pictures of occupying troops marching up Langstraat

I've visited camp Vught where the horror of imprisonment and extermination of minorities is laid bare - in all its vulgar extremism.

There was none of that experience in mainland Britain

You see - the last time Britain was invaded was by a Dutchman!

By the forces of William Prince of Orange

We welcomed him with open arms

Not a shot was fired - and we crowned him King William 3rd in 1689

So to a great extent - in the UK we have little or no understanding of what it's really like to be occupied

For almost 1000 years we have been invasion free - We have been insulated from European invasions and counter invasions

Consequently consideration of what freedom means to us – to me - perhaps comes from slightly different angle to yours.

It may go some way to explaining our views on the value of the EU and Brexit –

But don't worry - I'm not going to go there!

What we do have in common – is an understanding of how important our freedom is to all of us

And our joint determination to preserve it

But what does freedom mean?

What does it mean to you?

How do we protect it?

The concept is complicated – and has been the subject of thinking of philosophers for thousands of years

It changes as society changes – freedom and its definition evolves as we and our countries, our laws and institutions evolve

Over the centuries we've developed moral codes – religious and secular

Codified structures administered for the good of society by the majority have matured for the most part as democracies – with morality as their foundation

Our democratically elected governments should - in theory - provide a safety net

They should protect our freedom against the forces of totalitarianism – but history tells us that even the most carefully structured democracies can and do fail

When government is deficient and weak, when it's not strong and decisive, the very systems we have in place to protect and nurture our freedom can collapse.

Extremist minorities exploit weakness, - and guess what – religious, ethnic and nationalistic groups polarise to support them.

Extremism offers a winning and alluring alternative to weak and indecisive government

Many extreme governments masquerade as being democratic, but are actually totalitarian

They subjugate their citizens and are outwardly aggressive and dangerous

Lord Acton a 19th century British philosopher said 'Power corrupts – absolute power corrupts absolutely' – Never a truer word

Ranged against our democracies are those who have absolutely no respect for individual rights or freedoms and will stop at nothing to achieve their aims.

To them human life is cheap and dispensable – just as it was in Camp Vught not that long ago

Think of Syria and the awful suffering and destruction there. A Russian aided dictatorship wilfully destroying its cities and its people

Think of the threatening military aggression of Russia, China, North Korea, Iran and the like on our western democracies

Think of cyber warfare's unseen attacks on our institutions and businesses in an attempt to create chaos and instability

The threat to our nations' freedom is real – we ignore it at our peril

There's something else I'd like you to think about

Your personal freedom

In these days of electronic wizardry, large organisations and our governments gather massive amounts of information about us.

Our financial affairs, our preferences and even where we are at this very moment can easily be scrutinised and monitored

Of course there are huge benefits from the advances in communication

But there are also downsides, and dangers, in the potential invasion of our privacy and freedom

So - our individual and national freedom is not guaranteed – it's fragile – it's constantly under pressure – under siege and arguably being eroded

Our freedom can be very easily lost

We constantly need to think about its preservation – we must remain alert to the dangers – we must not become complacent

Only those whom we elect to govern us can ensure its protection

Our freedom and how we management it, is the critical balance between living within the laws we create, and the creation of an overbearing state

So - if we are to effectively protect our freedom we must demand robust yet fair government – it is absolutely essential

We vote to elect those to whom we entrust the protection of our freedom

As an aside I've been looking at the number of us who actually do so

In the last Netherlands national election only 56% of the electorate bothered to vote

In the EU election only 42% voted in the Netherlands against an average of 50% across the EU

We must use our hard won right to vote - and then hold those we elect to account

You see – you and I are the guardians of our own freedom and by definition guardians of our nations' freedom too

But we must also ensure that those we elect have strength

Strength militarily to defend our national sovereignty – to have the ability to repel aggression

And strength to execute the administration of our laws justly - and with compassion

So what of the future?

Clearly our children are our future – it is our duty to educate them

We must tell them not just about the terrible consequences of war and possible loss of freedom - but of the lessons we've learned.

We must remind them of the sacrifice of their great grandparents

The hardship and suffering they endured so that we may be free

We must remind them too of their collective responsibility to cherish and protect their - and their nation's freedom

We must encourage them to use their right to vote

If we do not, we shall condemn them to the risk of repeating our mistakes

It's a huge challenge and one from which we must not shrink – we cannot - and must not be complacent

I have a favourite quotation which I think sums up the challenge we face

It's from St Paul

Who almost 2000 years ago was imprisoned in Rome

He wrote

"We wrestle not against flesh and blood

But against principalities – against powers – against the rulers of darkness of this world – against wickedness in high places"

His writing is as relevant today as it was then

Thank you