

20th Anniversary of the Greek Ombudsman Conference

State and Society: Challenges to Rights and Freedoms

Conference Opening Remarks by Peter Tyndall on 21 February 2019

Good morning colleagues and distinguished guests.

The IOI European Region, under the Presidency of Rafael Ribo, has been running a highly successful series of conferences and workshops on topics of great interest to the Ombudsman community. They give us a platform for learning from each other, focusing on innovation and considering matters of mutual interest. Unfortunately, they are also needed to help us to shape our responses to the many challenges we face, as we will be doing here in Athens over the next two days.

We are very grateful indeed to the Greek Ombudsman for hosting us here. Greece has suffered considerable deprivations and challenges in responding to the dual crises of austerity and immigration. It's inspirational to see the way the Office of the Ombudsman has responded, and I hope that the presence of colleagues from across Europe can be seen as a gesture of our solidarity with the Office and the people of Greece in these challenging times.

When I spoke yesterday evening I referred to the importance of context in shaping the work of the Ombudsman. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama, wrote his often cited essay "The End of History?" He suggested that the development of Western liberal democracy might signal the endpoint of humanity's sociocultural evolution and become the final form of human government.

I am from a generation which witnessed great events. We saw the ending of apartheid in South Africa. We saw the fall of the Berlin Wall and Germany reunited. We saw the end of fascist regimes in Spain and in Portugal. On my own island, we saw the ending of violence in Northern Ireland. At the time, it was all too easy to believe that the world was fast becoming a settled, safe peaceful place with an ever expanding democratic space and a growing respect for human rights as suggested by Francis Fukuyama. How wrong we were.

Georg Hegel said that "We learn from history that we do not learn from history." We should have known better. The liberal democratic utopia, like all other utopias, was an illusion. Instead, driven by the mass movement of peoples caused by post-colonial wars and famine, the hugely uneven distribution of wealth and opportunity, the failure to tackle the loss of heavy industries in Europe and the USA and the banking collapse, we have witnessed the rise of populism, fuelled by xenophobia and the success of its supporters in the media and social media in persuading people who did not have access to prosperity, or even adequate

food housing and healthcare in many instances, to blame other disadvantaged people for their exclusion.

In response, we have seen the emergence of governments in some countries which do not respect basic rights and freedoms, we have seen the demonisation of refugees and asylum seekers, and the erosion of respect for the rule of law. Policies such as Brexit can also be attributed, at least in part, to these causes.

We have seen the rise of fake news. We have seen assertion replace evidence in political discourse. We have seen the abuse of social media and its use to promote hatred and discrimination and to influence the outcome of elections.

In this very overheated political environment, Ombudsman Offices in some countries have come under threat simply for doing their job, holding governments to account, speaking truth to power. Working to support them has become a growing aspect of the work of the IOI.

The IOI has been working with the Venice Commission to help it develop a new set of principles designed to set out an aspirational standard for the role of the Ombudsman which will help to support our Offices and shape them for the future, as well as providing a template for new Offices. We have also been working with the Council of Europe to help to develop a new recommendation on the institution of the Ombudsman, and have established a Working Group to drive forward similar work with the United Nations. I am pleased that Igli Totozani, former Ombudsman of Albania and member of the drafting group of the Venice Commission will be speaking to us tomorrow. Getting new international standards and norms in place will be a useful addition to the tools available to us to work in support of our colleagues.

Ombudsman Offices across Europe have a key role to play in establishing facts, and offering a voice of reason in a turbulent climate. We work from evidence, and our casebooks give us a unique insight into the experience of our communities. The power of the individual stories we can tell gives weight to the case we make for change and improvement. We can tell the stories of those people whose rights are being denied them. We can show the impact on people when they do not receive the services to which they are entitled. We can make the case for systemic change to services, to entitlements and even to laws, when these are not serving the people of our countries and regions. In so doing, we can help to tackle the challenges to rights and freedoms which our states and societies are experiencing.

The conference agenda for the next two days will give us opportunities to consider all of these important topics and our response to them. The Ombudsman has put together a stimulating and relevant programme with a range of excellent speakers.

In doing our work, we rely heavily on our relationships with our Parliaments. As a bastion of democracy, Ombudsman Office works closely with our Parliaments, as the protector of the Office, the recipient of our reports and the body which holds the administration to account in respect of failings identified by the Ombudsman. In that regard, we are greatly honoured by the presence of the Speaker of the Hellenic Parliament, Mr Nikos Voutsis, who will address us now.