



European Network of Ombudsmen Conference 2017

European Ombudsman Opening Speech

19th June 2017

Colleagues, friends, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, Could I extend a very warm greeting to all of you and thank you for taking the time out of your busy lives to join us here in Brussels.

Last year's seminar produced some very honest, very open, and very insightful discussion about the major issues that confront us as Ombudsmen, as members of civil society, as politicians and as citizens. I am confident that over the next two days we will achieve the same.

We manage this year yet again to hold our seminar at a key moment in the history of the European Union. Last year we gathered just one week before the British referendum on Brexit and today as I speak, within the last two hours, British and EU negotiators have sat down not too far from here to begin to negotiate the terms of that separation.

Last year, we also waited in anticipation for the result of the US Presidential election and today, just five months after the inauguration of the winner, we bear witness to the disruption across many areas of our political and civic life that the election of President Trump has prompted.

But such is the pace of political change and political disruption that on a daily basis our assumptions about what

might happen next, our assessment of the forces that are fuelling change, are challenged.

2016 was the year of the so-called populist. We linked Brexit to the election of Trump and some feared a domino effect across many parts of Europe. Yet the centre held in the Netherlands, a brand new centre arose in France and swept all before it, and notably Marine Le Pen's National Front, and so called right wing populist parties in Finland and Germany have also struggled.

Equally, the hard Brexit line championed by British Prime Minister May as she sought to strengthen an already strong electoral position was rejected although how the message of that election is interpreted or acted upon still remains unclear.

Even in the US, democratic forces, perhaps made complacent through the Clinton and Obama years, have been – counter intuitively – emboldened and empowered rather than weakened by the Trump Presidency. The mainstream media has recovered its energy, reasserted itself in its role as a guardian of democracy, attracted new readership and engagement at a time when the world awaited its extinction, and is acting as a powerful counter force to the weight of the Trump administration. Equally the US courts, long thought of in many cases as over politicised and partisan, are also playing out their constitutional role in a way that is also providing protection from the authoritarian impulses of the new Presidency.

It is not all of course all good news. There are concerns about the weakening of democratic institutions in certain EU states, where leaders view either courts or civil society or both as potential 'enemies of the people'. The 'them and us' mentality risks a reversal to a past which we had hoped had gone forever and how the EU manages these important challenges will be critical to its own wider legitimacy. I look forward to listening later this afternoon to EU Commission Vice

President Frans Timmermans, whose brief is precisely to support and promote democracy and the rule of law throughout the EU.

Equally, while populist parties, and particularly those of the right, may not have been voted into power, or even close to it, their activism has nonetheless influenced policy making in the centre, the clearest expression of that being of course, the decision to hold a UK EU referendum . Greater assistance to migrants and refugees has also, arguably, been stalled because of anti-migrant pressure and the EU itself has shown itself reluctant to put pressure on reluctant member states for fear of encouraging greater electoral support for eurosceptics and europhobes or for reasons of geopolitics.

Our speakers on the next panel will give us their very direct experience of dealing with these issues either from an Ombudsman or Petitions committee perspective, the global challenge perspective of the Open Government partnership or the very much hands on, on the ground perspective of a city mayor trying to develop a stable and prosperous integrated community.

Each of us will have attempted to frame the recent dizzying political developments in a way that makes it understandable to us. Some prefer the word 'rejectionist' to 'populist' others see a world divided as between those who benefit from globalisation and those who are its victims ,while more see the simple age old divide as simply between the haves and the have nots. Many of us also recognise it as a way of framing any political ideology that sets up whatever the particular populist is against - whether ethnic minorities or the leaders of the European Union - as a justifiable target for anger or even worse.

Perhaps, and in the most tragic way imaginable, all of those forces, all of those supposed alignments or fractures, were most visibly seen in the conflagration that destroyed lives, families, livelihoods and dreams last week in the London fire at Grenfell tower. And as we reflect on that, we also think of and express our condolences to those who perished in the fires in Portugal and to their families.

When the ship the Titanic sank in 1912 with the deaths of over 1500 people, historians, philosophers, sociologists and many others read into it not just the fact of the sinking of the ship, but also wider narratives about class, industrialisation, inequality, migration, empire – the very stuff of political and cultural debate at that time. The very same phenomenon is happening with the Grenfell tragedy as all of you will know.

And it struck me as I read that commentary and observed the anger and the fear that came not from the people but from the politicians and those charged with administering the policies that culminated in this, that perhaps when we talk about populism and globalisation etc, that what we are really talking about is simply the ability or inability of people to exercise control over their lives, to have agency, to plan for themselves and their families and above all to keep themselves safe and not to rely on the transient political whims of others.

And that I believe is where we come in, or should come in, as Ombudsmen. It is our job to lend sufficient power to the people that we serve, that they are able to stand on an equal footing with the powers that shape or attempt to shape their lives. When we make the case for the person wrongly denied a home, or a hospital bed, or a disability service, or a place in which they can safely have minded an elderly parent, or decent treatment in a refugee camp, we are giving them the power so denied to the people that sat helplessly waiting for their death in a tower block in the richest area of the richest city in one of the richest countries in the world. How ironic

indeed that the first person named as having died was a Syrian refugee.

Perhaps, the UK election and Grenfell will mark a change in the current Brexit narrative. Who knows? I sense an emboldened EU, I sense an uncertain UK. Perhaps it is time for all of us to address so called populism with a more direct gaze at what this turbulence really is all about – the power of people to live a good life and to pass that good life on to their children. The debate should be about which system better allows that and not, as one commentator put it, about melancholic nationalism, anomie, and sovereignty.

It now gives me great pleasure to introduce a gentleman who very kindly agreed to open this conference with us. Mr Vladimir Manka is a member of European Parliament from Slovakia and holds two roles in particular that are very important for the European Ombudsman. His role as Questor includes Parliament's relationship with the Ombudsman and he is also a member of the Budget committee. Today he has very graciously accepted our invitation to speak representing the European Parliament and I am immensely grateful to him for doing so.

Mr.Manka...