



PRIME MINISTER GRO HARLEM BRUNDTLAND

Commencement speech

The University of Wisconsin, Madison

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It is a privilege to be with you here today. I am especially proud to visit a part of America where the impact of Norwegian immigration is so visible and alive as here in Madison.

Yesterday, we visited the Institute for Scandinavian Studies. It is the only university institute in the US where the Norwegian language has been taught for more than 120 years. That is almost as long as we have had compulsory language education in Norway. But after all - you stay on the top in every subject - don't you?

There is a close friendship between Wisconsin and Norway. Many Norwegian immigrants came here. Oslo and Madison are sister cities. President Clinton naturally appointed a son of Wisconsin and a grandson of Norway as his ambassador to my country. He is here with us today, and you know him well - Ambassador Tom Loftus.

Many of you will have seen us waving to you during the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer. And those of us who didn't wave to the cameras were probably busy cheering those gold winning Wisconsinites Dan Jansen and Bonny Blair.

All in all, the Lillehammer Olympics were probably the biggest thrill in the world of sports since the Badgers won the Rose Bowl on January first.

Judging from the TV coverage of the Winter Olympics, one might think that there were a hundred million Norwegians. In fact we are some four million. There are more people of Norwegian descent in America than there are people in Norway.

Almost every family in Norway has ties with the USA. They are the fibers in the fabric which has been woven by people and time between your country and mine. These bonds, our alliance in war and peace, our commitment to freedom, democracy and social justice and our shared values are among the reasons why I was so pleased to celebrate our national day - the 17th of May - in Washington as the guest of the President of the United States.

Today is a day that all of you graduates will remember as long as you live, and I am happy to share this occasion with you. I once had the privilege to attend an American University myself and to experience Commencement as you are doing. The University was Harvard. - I am told that Harvard ranks about equal to Wisconsin. - The year was 1965 and I received my Masters Degree in public health.

I have sometimes been asked what it was like to move from the medical profession into politics. My answer is simple: Medicine and politics are closely related. In my life they have formed one continuous line.

In my view, both politicians and doctors should be concerned with diagnosis, with finding the causes of a particular problem.

- They should both be concerned with finding the remedies, - with how to solve present and future problems.

- And they should both be concerned with how we can anticipate and prevent problems to reduce the need to react and cure.

As I was myself, today's graduates are a highly privileged group. You have received the best education in the world. You are rich in opportunity. You have hopes and perhaps also doubts about the future.

In today's world of profound and rapid change, it is sometimes hard to retain a wider perspective when we are deluged with a constant flow of information. Our problem is not lack of information, but how to distinguish between essential and non-essential.

It can be challenging to stand up for one's own basic values in life when even values are offered on a market by a wide range of vendors.

My appeal to you today is to become involved in public life. You should serve your country and your community and maintain a social conscience so that you do not become indifferent to the plight of your fellow citizens. In an increasingly interdependent world, we are all neighbours. Our solidarity must be extended also beyond national borders and even beyond generations.

The way we organize our own societies will largely decide what we will be able to contribute to global prosperity. I cannot tell you how to do it, but I can tell you how we are trying to live up to our values in Norway and Scandinavia. And I hope that we can continue to learn from each other.

Wisconsin is after all a model of social engineering and the university has been instrumental in developing some of the most advanced tax laws, unemployment benefit schemes and social security schemes in the United States.

At the turn of the century, Norway was one of the poorest countries in Europe. During this century, we have changed from a country where most people were fishermen, farmers and artisans to a modern industrialized nation. Poverty has been replaced by an advanced welfare state.

We do not claim to have created the Good Society, but the political system associated with the term "the Scandinavian model" has attracted a great deal of interest because it combines three elements: the improvement and expansion of social, health and educational services; maximum participation in the work force, especially for women, and, through active state intervention, sustained full employment. These elements have been

realized within the framework of an open economy and international cooperation.

Like the United States, the Nordic societies are based on private enterprise and market economy. Our different traditions have led us to curtail the full effect of market-based economies somewhat differently.

In the Nordic societies, we place a high premium on equality. The basic idea has been to humanize capitalism and market mechanisms by extracting from them their huge potential for growth and job creation while protecting crucial areas from their unbridled impact. The power of money has been balanced by policies designed to equalize access to and distribution of rights. Not every inequality is unjust, but every unjust inequality must be a target for change.

When neo-liberalism was fashionable in the 1980s, many suggested, even hoped that the Scandinavian model had reached its limits, that it had become so bloated and expensive that it would have to be abandoned.

The special features of the Nordic societies do not consist in the size of the public sector, nor in the level of social benefits or even the cost of social security. In fact in Norway we spend 8 per cent of our gross national product on health care compared with 14 per cent here in America.

The special features are rather the ways in which the services and benefits are organized, the rules of entitlement, and the absence of a connection between the duty to finance the system and the rights to benefit from it. Our system is based on universal coverage, it is laid down by law, and financed by taxation.

All European countries have of course social security systems. Three main systems can be discerned:

- The Bismarck system, developed in Germany, was based on compulsory insurance for employees.
- The Beveridge system, developed in the United Kingdom, was based on state organization, but retained user contributions as a condition for receiving benefits.

- The Nordic system is run by national agencies and provides benefits on the basis of citizenship and not on occupation, income or contribution.

Some people regard the Nordic system as "socialist", or even worse, as "bureaucratic". In fact there is nothing to indicate that the number of bureaucrats in Scandinavia exceeds that needed in other countries are to run industrially advanced nations.

We are probably more favourably disposed to the role of the State than many other people. The word "public" has no negative connotation in Scandinavia. A strong public sector is viewed as the most reassuring tool. Market forces are good at allocating resources effectively, but they cannot

build community purpose or instill social responsibility, or assert the larger vision only people can have of a just and equitable society.

Of course care had to be taken to defend what had been achieved from abuse, from people who desire to take more than their share of the common cake. We have to be alert to such threats. The system must be changed if it motivates people's essential choices in life. The social security system must not keep people who are able to work extra from doing so, it must not determine whether they marry or divorce, or allow for substantial and "legal" tax evasions.

Receiving social benefits is not intended to be a way of life, - of perpetuating dependence. Rights to benefits must be coupled with obligation.

The aim of any successful policy of redistribution is to unleash people's true potential. One of the greatest success stories ever was the GI Bill which gave hundreds of thousands of soldiers the opportunity to return to society by acquiring a college education they could not otherwise have afforded. This clearly made an enormous contribution to growth in America.

Redistributive policies must activate people rather than passify them. In Europe more than 20 million people are out of work. 100 billion dollars is being spent on unemployment compensation every year, and far less on active measures for reemployment. It seems such a waste to pay people for not doing anything when all of our societies are crying for important work to be done.

Redistributive policies are needed also on the global scale. One billion people live in abject poverty. The world population will double some time in the next century. 90 per cent of the population increase is taking place in developing countries. The widening gap between the fortunate few and the powerless poor is dangerous and it is morally unacceptable.

Each country will have to assume the bulk of the responsibility for its own people. But its success or failure will affect us all.

We need a strong international public sector. There is a need for a more equitable sharing of global responsibilities. Bills for peace-keeping, bills for peace-building, for averting environmental disasters, alleviating poverty and famine and curbing the population explosion must be equitably shared, because we are all dependant on success in every one of these fields.

But policies to alleviate problems in other countries will not succeed unless they are supported by a socially conscious people. Cynics are often quick to dismiss international solidarity as futile, costly, and contrary to what they see as national interests. Such attitudes are dangerous. "Cynics know the price of anything and the value of nothing," said Oscar Wilde.

We need a strong international public sector, built on the United Nations, where all countries provide according to their ability and receive according to their needs. Countries should reconcile their traditional interests with new principles of solidarity.

Sometimes we have belatedly seen the threats to peace and prosperity. The tragedy in Bosnia unfolded while a number of Western countries had different views as to what the outside world could and should do. But the tragedy would have been even more perilous had we been indifferent to it.

The transition to democracy in South Africa would not have happened had we all been indifferent to apartheid.

Peace would not have come to the Middle East had we all been indifferent to it.

George Bernhard Shaw said that the greatest sin toward our fellow human beings is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them. I believe in the forces of democracy in this country and that together, Europe and America can and will lead the world towards a new dawn.

Remember, as you take leave of the university, that it is not the military power or the gross national product of the United States of America that is the reason for its attractiveness to the rest of the world. Much more important are its contribution to freedom and justice. They have not been exhausted today.

In exercising power in the world, the power of the moral example can be far greater than material riches or equipment. Each one of you will have your own contribution to make. Let the imperfect world around you be your challenge. Get involved in public life.

To the parents, family members and faculty I say congratulations. You have given these young people a chisel. They are sons and daughters of creative people, inventive, resourceful, daring. A generation in which so much hope is reposed. Now life, experience and time will bring out the courage you have bred in them.