Political Courage

Catherine Connolly

President Connolly of Ireland gave this speech at the 'In Defence of Democracy' conference, hosted by Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, in Barcelona on 10 April 2026.

I am honoured to be here, as President of Ireland, to give my first address abroad at this critically important summit.

It is timely and fitting that we gather under an initiative championed by two leaders who have shown the political courage this moment demands. President Sánchez and President Lula deserve our recognition, and our gratitude, for placing the defence of democracy at the centre of the international agenda. We must all work together to hold that course. Too much is at stake.

Democracy has played a vital role in the history of civilisation. It has transformed the world from power structures of empire, colonialism and conquest to self-governance, sovereignty, and peaceful co-existence. Democracy itself, however, is now under attack.

The principles and values at the core of democracy were outlined in crystal clear language in the United Nations Charter. That charter, signed in 1945, remains a text that is clear in its purpose and intent. It articulates a determination to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" and, significantly, it confirms the universality of fundamental human rights.

The essential question for us then is how have we come to this point? How have we moved from the crystal-clear language of the UN charter championing human rights to the crystal-clear language that now champions 'might is right'?

We must reflect, honestly and urgently, on how we have allowed this to occur – how has precision given way to euphemism; how has the universal become conditional; how has the vocabulary of law and rights been hollowed out and replaced by the language of dominance? Because when language is debased, accountability soon follows, and when accountability

collapses, so does the order we claim to uphold with disastrous consequences for humanity.

The answer, of course, is not comfortable for any of us. Over 80 years, it has happened through accommodation, through the quiet retirement of inconvenient principles, and through our collective willingness to treat violations by powerful states as exceptional cases rather than the precedents they have become. Each time a violation was absorbed without consequence, the threshold for the next one was raised. We played our part by valuing stability over accountability, and consensus over candour.

That acquiescence has allowed the institutions of the United Nations to be undermined by some and treated with contempt by others. It has allowed sovereign nations to be invaded or threatened with invasion; has allowed vital UN organisations to be decimated; has allowed UN Special Rapporteurs to be sanctioned and threatened with arrest; has allowed sitting judges of the International Criminal Court to be sanctioned simply for fulfilling their judicial mandate; has allowed us to selectively focus on certain wars, ignoring others, for example the war in Sudan, which started 3 years ago – almost to the day – and has seen 14 million people displaced.

In the face of this onslaught, we have an obligation to stand together to defend the very institutions established to uphold human rights without qualification following the horrors of two world wars. We must work together to deepen international cooperation, and to nurture and develop conditions for lasting peace.

This can only be achieved by both supporting and reforming the institutions and organisations of the United Nations. We need to make these institutions more representative and responsive so that they can help deliver peace and fully realise the vision of the United Nations Charter. A pathway in the form of '*Pact for the Future*' and the '*UN80 Initiative'* is already in place to start this journey. But we need to demonstrate political leadership, resilience, and courage at all levels, to support the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, and his successor – hopefully a woman – in delivering on this reform.

Ireland is uniquely placed to offer a valuable perspective as a neutral, post-famine, post-colonial republic, and I am conscious that many in this room share that post-colonial experience. Ireland is a small country that remains deeply committed to a strong, UN-led multilateral order. We joined the UN in 1955 and are very proud of our uninterrupted record of peacekeeping since 1958. We believe that multilateralism is not a luxury, it is a necessity. It is how we uphold international law. It is how we protect human rights. It is how we respond to the crises that no country can face alone – climate change, displacement, poverty, and the normalisation of war – all of which are inextricably linked. It is the only way to implement the sustainable development goals.

We believe fundamentally that multilateralism must be rooted in people: in civil society, in communities, and in those who advocate for justice, often at great personal risk. Their voices remind us that international cooperation must address lived realities, not only the concerns of states.

In that context, Ireland's candidacy for election to the United Nations Human Rights Council for the term 2027 to 2029 reflects our commitment to the universal nature and the individuality of human rights, the value we place on the multilateral system.

We must work together: to deliver peace, to strengthen our international institutions, and to reclaim the language of rights, international law, and human dignity. Let us remember what was highlighted by former UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, 'that the United Nations was not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell'.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh. Muchas gracias.

President Connolly and Prime Minister Sánchez