

Lest we forget June 14, and the guardians of our freedoms.

Address delivered at the commemoration of the mass deportations from the Baltic States by the Soviet Union
1940-1941 and 1944-1991.

Today we remember a dark, grievous and tragic day in the history of the Baltic states. Thousands of innocent people were taken from their homes, with only minutes of notice, transported to prisons and labour camps in faraway lands. Most were never seen or heard of again. Others were discovered as mutilated corpses. They had committed no offences. The only transgression of some of them was that they held views and values that the established regime did not like or approve. Many were merely random choices of an unyielding and callous regime. Today we remember and mourn all those victims of hate, intolerance, insecurity, fanaticism and extreme political violence. While we remember events on this day that took place 76 years ago, tragically, similar and even worse atrocities have kept occurring around the world ever since then. Over thousands of years, we don't seem to have learned the futility of the use of violence, armed aggression and oppression. Perhaps these traits and characteristics change only with evolutionary speed, measured by multiple generations.

However, more scholarly people than I have observed and concluded that over the millennia, we **have** become less violent and aggressive than in the past. This may be difficult to accept as our minds are still relatively fresh with recent wanton atrocities in Kabul and London as well as Australia. Yet, as we approach the centenary of World War I, our memory fades of the slaughter of soldiers in tens of thousands in a matter of days and weeks.

As we reflect on the events of this dark day in our histories, I invite you to consider what each and all of us could do to minimise the risk of these kinds of crimes against humanity - but also, no less importantly, the continuing challenges to liberal democracy. We must also not forget that what led to June 14, 1941 did not happen overnight but as part of a creeping, invasive and successive number of changes over a longer period of time.

I will risk the accusation of oversimplification.

Life, society, the world, people are highly complex systems. Yet, notwithstanding the complexities, there are usually elements and notions that carry more weight and influence than others.

And here, it may surprise you, I want to bring in the critical role of journalism and journalists and the press. I find it difficult not to quote my son, Peter Grete's Gandhi oration of 2016 at the University of New South Wales. It is relevant to mention that in his early career, Gandhi was also a newspaper man.

In the context of the fundamental concept of democracy, Peter said:

We are familiar with the usual three pillars – the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. But remember – in the classic model of democracy, the media is the fourth estate. It's there to hold the other three to account, to keep the public informed of the policies that are being enacted in our name, and to help oil public debate. It is an integral part of a properly functioning democracy.

Even authoritarian and autocratic regimes identify the three pillars of a system of governance, as well as the fourth pillar – the press. It is just that in some systems, the four pillars are not allowed to function freely and independently.

And of course, the main qualification is that the press should be able to express itself freely, unlike in many authoritarian countries where the press is regarded almost as the mouthpiece of the government. To quote the French philosopher Albert Camus, "a free press can of course be both good and bad. But a press that is not free can never be anything but bad."

Peter refers to the all-embracing label of the media. Within the broad pillar of the media, I want to focus on the component of journalism and journalists. Of course we need the various platforms of the generic notion of the media to carry the message but if we want to maintain a functional democracy, certainly the model that we are lucky to live under, and avert an event like the one we are commemorating today, I want to draw your attention to the value of journalists themselves as well as quality journalism generally.

Let us also remember that there are all kinds of journalists. Some are investigative journalists, beat reporters, breaking news reporters and explanatory reporters. But what is common about them all is that “they open our eyes”. This was the title of a song written about journalists when the campaign to free Peter from the Cairo prison was at its height. **THEY OPEN OUR EYES**. It is a very simple yet quite profound observation.

Today, journalism is under pressure, largely because of the versatility and technological potential of the media generally. The present business model is experiencing difficulties to remain sustainable. Currently our government is being pressed by the industry to change the rules and arrangements under which the various media platforms operate. There are of course important commercial interests and considerations at stake. It is a complex web of interests and arguments in which most of us are not particularly competent to participate. However, above all else, I suggest that if we care about maintaining our model of democracy, the primary concern of each and every one of us should be to ensure that skilled, ethical and experienced journalists are not squeezed out of the picture (which in fact has been happening right now).

The second concern that we should keenly maintain is that there should be a diversity of journalist voices and views. Journalism is an imperfect craft. There is no such thing as perfect objectivity because journalists are all human beings. (and let us hope they are not replaced by robots). They are fallible like the rest of us. They too respond to herd instincts and group think. Thus, the only way we can have a more complete and balanced picture is to have a diversity of independent views. Whatever reorganisation needs to take place to media laws generally, the challenge is to ensure that professional journalists still have a central place **and** that there is diversity.

This is where each and every one of us has a responsibility if we care about protecting what we have and minimising the risk of events like 1941. We need to support journalism and journalists, not just consume the media soup of endless animal videos, social trivia, seductive Instagrams and colourful sounds, however creative they may be. The encouraging signs are that while journalism is still undergoing tensions, obsessions with celebrity gossip is unlikely to kill journalism.

There are some good signs.

Michael Gill, former CEO and Editor-in-Chief of the Financial Review Group writes in the online journal Inside Story thus:

Big-name news media such as the Financial Times, the New York Times and the Washington Post – and many smaller media businesses around the world – have made viable business out of producing content that people value.

In other words, as the world around us is changing ever faster and is getting more complex, we need to rely more and more on quality and diversity of journalism to help us to understand the kaleidoscopic changes we have to deal with. The message clearly is that quality news sources are able to pay for themselves. But, quality comes at a price. We have become too used to getting our news almost for free, which for decades has been paid for by advertising.

Advertising now has other platforms to exploit which means that news and journalism must be paid for by us, the consumers. I suggest that we see this as a form of insurance against legislative over-reach and abuses of power as well as providing a sense of security in knowing what is going on. We sometimes begrudge having to pay the insurance premium, but we still do so while hoping that we never have to claim. Let us support journalism and journalists as a form of insurance against a creeping abuse of power and diminishing of freedoms. To paraphrase what Marie Curie is supposed to have said – *fear stifles life. We must try to understand more so that we may fear less*. Journalists help us to understand more so that we may fear less. I will even make the radical suggestion that all schools should teach some journalism literacy. Technology is energising change at the rate beyond our comprehension and ability to deal with it. Journalism can help us cope.

I suggest that a demonstration of the effectiveness of journalism as a form of insurance is the fact that so many journalists in recent years have been killed, jailed or put out of work. One can draw the conclusion that their work does indeed have powerful impact. Perhaps they have been too effective in holding authority to account. Journalists, it would seem, do constitute a threat to governments and regimes which are unwilling to be open and accountable.

Since 1992, 1238 journalists have been killed, mostly by someone's deliberate act, instead of an accident. (Stats are from Committee for the protection of journalists). The imprisonment numbers for 2016 are 259, of which 81 are in Turkey (with about another 2500 having been forced out of their jobs), 25 in Egypt, 38 in China. Ethiopia and Eritrea have 16 and 17 respectively. All other countries that have imprisoned journalists are in single figures. I will leave you to draw your own conclusions which countries have most to fear or something to hide from the public and journalists.

We, people of a Northern European heritage, have a tradition and high standard to live up to. Last year, Sweden celebrated 250 years since the establishment of laws guaranteeing free speech – the world's first legislation of its kind. I don't want to bore you with statistics but here are some very important and illuminating findings.

An overview of the latest World Press Freedom index is telling.

The top five places are Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Netherlands.

It may **not** surprise that the bottom five of the 180 countries assessed are China, Syria, Turkmenistan, Eritrea and North Korea. (Estonia is in 12th place, Australia 19, Latvia 28 and Lithuania 36.)

Here is a different comparison.

The World Justice Project for 2016 top rankings are

Denmark, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Netherlands and the bottom five are Cameroon, Egypt,

Afghanistan, Cambodia and Venezuela. (Australia ranks 11, Estonia 14, USA ranks 18. For some reason, Latvia and Lithuania did not participate in this project.)

This is not the place to discuss how the two sets of results interact but without doing so, I suggest there is a very significant relationship between press and journalistic freedom and justice and the rule of law. What is **also** very obvious is that the higher the ranking on both scales, the more stable are the governments and the more peaceful the countries. But these kinds of results do not come merely by wishing or good fortune. They have to be striven for and supported by the community – that means all of us. I want to put it to you that more often than not, what stands between democracy, imperfect as it often is, and despotism and demagogues is a fearless and independent press and journalists.

It is in our hands to demand, expect and support quality journalism and journalists. Tom Greenwell, writing in Inside Story recently found that

Currently, 10 per cent of Australians pay for online news. That places Australia somewhere in the middle internationally, with Norway having the highest rate of digital news purchasers (27 per cent) and Britain having the lowest (7 per cent). A quarter of Australians who don't presently pay for online news tell researchers they are likely to do so in the future. The question is whether news publishers will succeed in convincing that group to actually cough up.

It's easy to think of paying for news as something like paying for books, a matter of information acquisition. But news sites also offer a way of participating in political life and membership of a community.

I encourage **all** of us to do it as small and inexpensive insurance so that at some future time we don't lament freedoms lost or atrocious events remembered – simply because we have to use the feeble excuse that at the time, **we did not know!**

I have suggested that on an occasion like today, we should look for ways of ensuring that WHAT we are remembering today does not happen again. Of course, during the subsequent 76 years, similar or worse atrocities have happened. But what we have also learned is that armed and violent means to achieve ends have not always endured, have not been employed or have often even failed. I will not take your time to catalogue examples such as Vietnam, Algeria, the USSR, the Berlin wall, the tragic case of Afghanistan and others. It is depressing that, the supposedly intelligent creatures that we are, on so many counts we are desperately slow learners. After all the recorded history, we still have not learned that you cannot bomb or shoot ideas out of existence. You can only do that with a better, more persuasive and compelling idea.

And here is one such powerful idea.

In everything that we do, the most important condition is our mind-set or world view. Is the glass half full or half empty? Today I invite all of us to believe in the idea of the one-ness of humanity and the inevitability of universal peace - but not necessarily as an end state but also as a process; a journey, rather than a destination.

Far fetched as that idea may be in today's context, I put it to you that it IS the most important idea worth having. There is still much violent conflict around the world. But even in the last 100 years, we **have** made great progress in peace making. In the noise of today's exploding bombs and the cheering of enormous arms contracts, it is not easy to hear Martin Luther King's famous sermon on non-violence. In the barrage of images of military men and speeches of highly assertive politicians, it is hard to maintain the vision and example of Gandhi and Mandela. Yet, it is their examples that we must venerate and uphold as the primary option for the future.

Vasily Grossman, in his great wartime novel *Life and Fate*, said
"Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is a battle fought by a great evil, struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness. But if what is human in human beings has not been destroyed even now, then evil will never conquer." I think it is vital for us to believe in that.

We cannot erase the dark period of 1941 from our histories. But how might we react to it, 76 years later, beyond remembrance and commemoration? I submit to you that we recall this bleak day **not** with hate and bitterness in our hearts and minds but with deep sorrow for the victims. But at the same time we should be earnestly beseeching, advocating and soliciting our leaders that the deep desires of communities and peoples to seek self expression, self determination and independence must not be achieved with the use of armed might or aggression. Let us try to exercise the tolerance and reconciliation of which there are now many examples around the world; let us try to remove the bitterness and anger from our hearts and fervently believe that peaceful co-existence is possible. Kahlil Gilbran is attributed with *"an eye for an eye and the whole world would be blind"*.

Lest we forget June 14, 1941 - but also lest we forget to reconcile, forgive and make peace.

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Sydney, June 18, 2017.