

Bahrain Society Dinner 16th November 2009 – Dr. John Reid’s Speech

It is a great pleasure to address the Bahrain Society, especially alongside General Rashid, Bahrain’s Interior Minister, who was my opposite number when I was Home Secretary. We worked closely and well together.

It’s a shame we could not invite all my former opposite numbers tonight; but the room would not have been big enough.

Our two countries have been close friends, colleagues and partners for a long, long time – more than 175 years. Today we need that partnership more than ever. Globalisation involves interchange and interdependence: we both have to face the challenges of pandemics, energy issues, crime, counter-terrorism and the global financial crisis. We will certainly need more global financial cooperation. Bahrain, the first country in the Middle East to discover oil, has diversified wisely. It has developed major industries – aluminium, oil and gas, metal and shipyards, financial services and tourism. It has played a big role in developing Islamic finance. Throughout this period our links have remained strong, not least in education.

Around the world we see political turmoil in so many places. There is no template for democracy, no model that can be imposed. But we can learn from each other. Britain can perhaps learn something from the way in which Bahrain’s leaders’ experience of handling political difficulties; and so can others.

A great deal may have happened in the UK since the present government took over in 1997. In Bahrain the challenges and changes may have been even greater.

In the mid-1990s Bahrain suffered a spate of anti-government disturbances, and in 1996 a number of hotels and restaurants were bombed. As a result of those disturbances over 1000 people were held in detention without trial. They have since been released; there have been few political disturbances since then; and recent political reforms have widened opportunities for all sectors to participate in political life.

These reforms and the wise handling of the problems owe a great deal to H M King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. When Sheikh Hamad succeeded his father as ruler on the latter’s death in 1999, he began to transform Bahrain into a constitutional monarchy.

- He pardoned political prisoners and detainees in 2001, including those previously exiled from Bahrain;
- He abolished the State Security Law and State Security Court, both much criticised by opposition groups for suppressing freedom;
- After referendums and consultation, he presented Bahrain’s new constitution on 14 February 2002 – it set out plans for a bi-cameral parliament and transformed Bahrain into a Kingdom;
- In the most recent parliamentary and municipal elections, in November 2006, the voter turnout was 72%, a figure which puts the UK to shame;
- There is now development of political associations; and the cabinet has two female members.

General Rashid, you are to be congratulated on this combination of security and openness, under the guidance of H M the King. As is the Bahrain Society for inviting you here to address it.

The Society has, in this time of global challenges, as important a role as ever and as challenging. That is why I am delighted to be here tonight, to honour the friendship between the UK and Bahrain and to propose the Toast to the Society itself: The Bahrain Society.