Acceptance Speech

[On the occasion of the conferment of the degree of Doctor of Laws, Honoris Causa, by the University of Bath, on 9 November, 2016, in Bath, England.]

by

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The Vice Chancellor Professor Dame Glynis Breakwell, Professor Jane Millar, Professor Tim Woodman, students and professors of the university, and other distinguished guests,

I feel honored and humbled to be addressing the University of Bath on the occasion of its turning 50, and also for having been conferred the honorary degree, Doctor of Laws, by the university.

I mention the sense of honor and humility on such occasions, but one should also add guilt, since an honorary degree is the one degree in life which comes without an examination. Hence, with its news comes a sense of guilt—of having got away with something without working. All I can say is: Thank you for inflicting this guilt on me.

My last visit to Bath was in 1973 and I have magical memories of the place. I came with a fellow student of London University on Christmas day. There seemed to be no one in the streets. The city's long history so evident in the architecture and the hushed streets created an atmosphere which was both forlorn and stunningly beautiful. My only advice to anybody planning such a visit to Bath is to be careful in choosing which fellow-student you come with. You may end up spending a life time with that student. In my case, I got married to the fellow student and she is here today in the audience.

When I corresponded with your university and we agreed on this date a long time ago, we did not realize it would be such a momentous day—on the heels of this critically important American election. It has been a depressing election, with displays of deplorable behavior. Regrettably, this is not the exception but is becoming a norm in politics the world over. There are deep reasons for this, to do with the global economy. I shall be talking about this in my lecture later.

But having mentioned global policy, let me offer one advise to UK concerning Brexit. For a complex, technical issue like whether or not to be part of the European Union, defined by the Lisbon Treaty, referendums are not a good idea. It is like designing a new airplane by popular vote. I don't think a majority of the British people want to leave the EU. At times, you cast a negative vote to register protest, being sure that the negative decision will not go through. But if too many people do this, the decision, of course, does go through. This is a major, collective-action problem associated with voting.

So what should be done now? The courts recently declared that the decision to trigger article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty has to be a parliamentary decision. And that seems right. Britain's entry into the EU happened in 1973 through parliamentary approval; its exit should be done the same way.

Now, parliamentary processes take time. Britain must have the self-confidence to realize that the EU is worried about Britain's exit because that will embolden other nations in the Union. During this long process Britain can get concessions out of the EU, which, no matter what it says, is keen to have Britain stay. A legitimate argument can then be made that the referendum was conducted for an EU that has now changed and so the referendum does not apply. This will be a narrow escape from isolationism; be good for ordinary citizens; and a deft game-theoretic maneuver, undertaken entirely for the common good.

Turning to you, the students, I want to remind you that when politics gets nasty and economic policy challenges get big, the university acquires a responsibility. It is the one institution meant to remind us of our deeper, more-humane responsibilities and to urge us to do creative, innovative work to find new policies and new cures for the world's big challenges. Members of the community of the University of Bath, you should be honored to be associated with such an excellent university, which has already left an imprint in its relatively short life.

To be effective as a thinker and, at the same time, to be a force for good, you need to remind yourself of David Hume's famous dictum to hold on to your normative goals and, at the same time, do your positive analysis about the world with relentless honesty.

The ultimate goals one sets in life are important. When I joined the World Bank four years ago I worked hard to set some mission goals for the Bank. The Bank finally adopted two goals: the end of chronic, extreme poverty in the world by 2030 and the promotion of shared prosperity in all societies at all times.

How important goals and targets can be I realized from a trivial personal experience. Many years ago, I read in a magazine that every time you go jogging for 10 minutes, your life expectancy increases by 8 minutes. That looked pretty impressive, and I took to jogging. Then one day, while jogging, I asked myself, what is my target in life? Do I want to maximize my total time on earth or my total non-jogging time on earth? If it was the latter, I should immediately stop jogging because every 10 minutes of jogging clipped off 2 minutes of my non-jogging life.

Friends, your goals are of course for you to choose, but let me appeal to you we are 7.4 billion people sharing a small planet; we must try to reach out to one another irrespective of narrow identities of ethnicity, race, and religion.

As a skeptic, I feel there are very few things in life about which one can be sure. Values and morals are important to me but they have little to do with traditional codes or religion. I believe that compassion and love are the values that we should carry and nurture. Other normative principles should be derived from these.

As students, with your life ahead of you, there will be good days and bad. One advantage of being a skeptic is that on bad days you can tell yourself there is no way of knowing how tomorrow will turn out to be.

I was born in a large, joint family in Calcutta. The first place outside of India I set foot on was England, when I came here as a student in 1972. All through my childhood I had planned to be a lawyer. It was on a whim that I decided abstract reasoning was so much fun that I would do research, and do it on what I enjoyed most and would not care less about whether or not I got any appreciation. When I look back I feel lucky I found a career I enjoyed.

When seven years ago, I was invited to be Chief Economic Adviser to the Indian government, it came completely out of the blue, and I was in a quandary. On a little thought, I felt I had to do it. I had led a selfish life doing only what I enjoyed; I ought to give back a little. Those years in India and, after that, the four years at the World Bank in public life turned out to be unexpectedly enriching experience.

But what I value most is the world of ideas, of solving puzzles, and even creating some, of looking for patterns in nature. It so happens that the biggest leaps in human welfare have come from such ventures. For that reason, the university, which is the seat of such activity, is very special to me. And this honor from your university is something I will always treasure. Thank you.