Ufficio Stampa della Provincia autonoma di Trento
Piazza Dante 15, 38122 Trento
Tel. 0461 494614 - Fax 0461 494615
uff.stampa@provincia.tn.it

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On the third day of the 2019 Trento Economics Festival, Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow participated in a conversation with Tim Hames and Enrico Franceschini on liberal democracy.

John Bercow: “Democracy costs and democracy takes time”

John Bercow’s conversation with Tim Hames and Enrico Franceschini tackled the difficult topic of the fate of liberal democracy. His current role as the Speaker of the House of Commons gave an expert and optimistic perspective on the issue and gave hope to listeners who fear the wave of populism and the rise of autocracies.

John Bercow is the 157th Speaker of the House of Commons. On the third day of the Trento Economics Festival, he gave an animated and optimistic presentation with discussants Tim Hames and Enrico Franceschini. Hames first question asked, “Being that you are the 157th Speaker of the House, what have you done differently than the last 156 Speakers of the House?” Bercow replied by saying that he cannot claim to be different. When he was campaigning for Speaker of the House and even after he was elected, he has wanted to deliver change within the Chamber. For example, he shared that “Question Time” has become long-winded and ineffective. He wanted to incentivize the people to actually come into the chamber rather than resorting to social media, blogs, newspapers etc. He also wanted to make a point to revive the applications of urgent questions. Urgent questions are when citizens can apply to bring a question to the chamber that may have otherwise not been presented.
Mr. Bercow emphasized his efforts to “modernize” the Parliament. He shared that from tradition there was a “shooting gallery” that existed within the Parliament building but no nursery for those Members of Parliament (MPs) who need care for their children in order to better balance their work and life schedule. He proudly shared that the shooting gallery is being shut down and a nursery has been implemented and is operating wonderfully.
Mr. Bercow does not believe that liberal democracy is in crisis but, he does believe that is certainly faces challenges and that the battle to reassert the value of liberal democracy has to continue. One point made by Bercow that resulted in a roaring applause from the audience was that even with all of these extremists resorting to heinous tactics and attempting to destroy liberal democracy, they only make liberal democracy stronger. The actions of extremists will not undermine democracy.
When moving to the topic of Brexit, he said that he constantly hears people saying that all the MPs do is “talk” and they are not actually doing anything about the issues surrounding Brexit. However, Bercow had a different point of view by saying that “Parliament is literally ‘parler’, to speak or to talk.” Therefore, Bercow thinks that in a sense, Parliament is doing exactly what they are supposed to be doing, talking and debating. He stated that democracy costs and democracy takes time therefore we cannot just expect solutions to happen overnight. We must embrace the best forms of political expression without surrendering to them.
In addition to wanting to modernize the Parliament building, Mr. Bercow shared that he wants to modernize the way the Parliament engages with the citizens. He said that speed, accessibility and intelligibility are the most important components to make information available to those who are outside of the institutions. He claims to be a “champion on proper functioning of the House.” For example, he shared that he invoked a 17th century law in order to protect the dignity of the Parliament. His reasoning was that the law was implemented for a reason and we must abide by it. However, he revealed that he will not be constrained by non-legally binding traditions simply because “it has never been done.”

Watch the video with John Bercow here

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