

The roots of liberalism go back as far as Socrates and the Old Testament prophets - Isaiah even offers a functional definition: "A liberal deviseth liberal things". Liberal ideas have always been at the very core of European civilization.

Against this backdrop, it is hard to take too seriously the innumerable articles that have appeared over the years - for at least the past century, I imagine - about the decline and death of liberalism. We can only borrow the words of Mark Twain, and tell those who inquire that the reports of our death have been greatly exaggerated. Even Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Canada's first Prime Minister of French ancestry and one of our greatest statesmen, told his caucus in 1916, in a moment of depression, "I have lived too long; I have outlived liberalism" - but his party has governed Canada for three-quarters of the years since.

So I believe that we should not allow the occasional defeat or setback to convince us that we are irrelevant or out-of-date. The liberal approach and attitude still make sense, perhaps more than ever: to regard each challenge as an opportunity that can lead to worthwhile accomplishment, and to achieve through public life the values that are the essence of liberalism - the freeing of the individual from subservience to the mass, the breaking of shackles so every human being can grow to his or her potential, and a passionate commitment to fairness and equity, equal opportunities and civil liberties.

Western Europe and North America have had their revolutions and fought their wars. Post-war reconstruction and development have led to increased political stability, basic justice, a large degree of social equity and financial stability. This is in no way to diminish the very real strains on our financial and monetary systems, nor to belittle the inordinate amounts of unemployment, nor the vicious cycles of inflation that presently beleaguer all of our societies. Rather, it is to point out that in comparison to many corners of this earth, and particularly in contrast with the developing nations, we are still the privileged few.

As such, I believe that Western Europe and North America have a special role to play in the North-South dialogue, and that we must continue to play that role, in spite of our own difficulties.