

Thank you so much, Sir Ciaran, for your wise words. The end of civilization? You certainly don't pull your punches! Indeed, to change the metaphor you have given us both barrels this evening!

For you've demonstrated, using many pertinent examples, that the considerable progress humanity has made over the last number of decades, and indeed has come to expect - is under threat. And you've explained that the reason it is under threat is because those things that underpin it - our values such as fairness, equality, integrity, and perhaps I might add free speech - all those ingredients of a genuine liberal market democracy - are themselves under threat.

It seems we are at a crossroads. We've travelled a long way since Francis Fukuamya told us in the 90s that we had reached the end of history because liberal democratic ideas had triumphed. If we felt at all complacent then, little did we know what lay around the corner...

What you have said this evening reminds me of Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Less Travelled* - which many of you may know. 'Two roads diverged in a yellow wood', he writes - 'and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveller, long I stood, and looked down one as far as I could, then took the other....'

You have eloquently described the two roads diverging in front of us and have shown where they might lead.

1. One road is the road we all are familiar with, the road of progress for humanity, increased life expectancy and continuing improvement in housing, healthcare, sanitation, underpinned by free speech, integrity, democracy and all the good things that we stand for here. The road many of us think we are still on. But you have warned us against assuming that all the values we cherish will automatically continue..
2. For tonight you have painted a very convincing picture of another, darker road that we already seem to be taking. You have explained all that underpins that road - rising intolerance, lack of social cohesion - , the concentration of power, obscene inequality (and greed I might add, looking at the recent Football shenanigans) - all the things that put our liberal democracy under threat - and you have suggested that right down the end of that second road lies the modern equivalent of the fall of the Roman Empire. And this stuff is very real. A couple of headlines in last weekend's papers caught my eye. One said: 'The West is playing with fire by rejecting the enlightenment values that defined it' and another : 'When leaders care less about ethics and integrity than rules, society's bonds corrode - the article that followed ended, chillingly, 'this friends, is how civilizations die'. (I did wonder if the author had had a sneak preview of your speech!)

But you haven't just *described* this parting of the ways - you have challenged all of us to *do* something about it... Maybe some of us are like those frogs in the illustration much loved by teachers of business studies, lying back in the warm water, blissfully unaware that it is gradually heating up to boiling point! We need a wake-up call - ad you have given us one.

For, as the great Edmund Burke put it, the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil, is for good people to do nothing...

And so you have encouraged us to *engage* – to get involved both personally and politically - and, for those of us who run businesses, at a corporate level too, championing these things like cohesion, equality, inclusion, and I would add integrity, fairness, decency and what I can only describe as graciousness – expecting it of ourselves and expecting it of, and encouraging it in, others.

The poem I mentioned ends as follows: ‘Two roads diverged in a wood - and I, I took the one less travelled by - And that has made all the difference.

Thank you, Sir Ciaran for encouraging us all tonight to *make* a difference....

And now I’d like to ask everyone to unmute so that we can show our appreciation for Sir Ciaran in the usual way.

Applause

Thank-you. Could you possibly press the mute button again..!

And many thanks to James Hasler, the unseen hero who has been pressing all the button in the right places to keep us on track this evening; to our wonderful beadle Tim Gutteridge, whom it has been lovely to see in action again, and to our wonderful clerk Gaye Duffy without whom this event would not have taken place.

Now I do hope civilization doesn’t actually end *tonight*. Well at least not before we’ve had a chance to enjoy a drink or two together. If you have to race to catch the virtual equivalent of a train, please do feel free to leave at this point. (One of our members did suggest that we simulate a ride home on Thameslink but I’m afraid the technology wasn’t quite up to that!) Thank you all for coming and I look forward to seeing many of you in a few minutes as we come together in smaller groups for the traditional stirrup cup.

