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**Address at the First National Convention of the Indian Liberal Group (ILG)
in Hyderabad, December 6th, 2002 by Hubertus von Welck, Regional Director,
Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung, New Delhi (*)**

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Friends,

I am pleased to be present here today at the First National Convention of the Indian Liberal Group and consider it as a privilege to address you.

This is indeed an exciting phase of the Indian Liberal Group and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation is happy to be a part of it.

The Chairman of our Foundation, Count Lambsdorff, sends you his best wishes. He regrets that he can not attend your convention. He is however convinced that this convention will be an important occasion to strengthen the liberal cause in India.

In my brief presentation I would like to touch upon some basic liberal principles and link them to good governance in order to make society a more livable place.

Firstly, a Liberal Foundation like ours values the freedom of the individual, and as a protective and participative framework Human Rights, Rule of Law and Democracy as being the essential pre-conditions for the social and economic development of any country.

We Liberals support democracy wholeheartedly as long as democracy promotes freedom and does not engender tyranny. Democracy is by no means the sole solution to the problems we face for a number of reasons. For example:

- Most decisions - including political decisions - have unforeseen effects. This also applies to decisions made by majorities. Safeguards in the form of checks and balances are hence very important in a democracy.

- Democracy per se does not protect minorities. There are two reasons for protecting minorities against majorities: the obvious one is the liberal commitment to the liberty of the individual – as the smallest minority - and a pragmatic one. Minorities guarantee progress. Good ideas are always ideas initially put forward by a minority.
- From a liberal point of view there are certain principles, the principle of RULE OF LAW, and the principle of FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS, those constitute what we know as liberty, that may **not** be amended, even if a majority so wants. An amendment would mean fundamental change in the relationship between the state and the individual to the detriment of the latter. The end of democracy is not the promotion of arbitrary rule.

It follows that no government, however legitimised, can do whatever it likes.

Democracy for a liberal is only one aspect of an ideal political system. Other important aspects include rule of law, protection of fundamental rights, limitation of power - which means also "small government" - and a framework promoting free and mutually beneficial interaction, which will take place on a free market.

Democracy pertains to the method of rule, liberty pertains to the objective of rule. The two are, however, inseparable. Democracy is an expression of participation and participation is an inherent part of the liberal concept of freedom: Citizens have rarely enjoyed freedom without democracy and a thriving democracy is fuelled by freedom. In this context it is important to remember that: Democracy is the only method of peaceful change.

- ◆ Democracy's biggest advantage over other forms of governance is, arguably, that it offers and permits alternatives. The precondition is a strong, credible and institutionalised opposition - strong in that it can attract enough votes; credible in that it can govern if elected; and institutionalised in that it is effectively protected by law and respected by the government in power.
- ◆ Democracy is the only feasible and satisfactory framework for a plural society.

The commitment to democracy - understood in the sense described - is only real and meaningful from a liberal point of view if those in positions of power

- are prepared to organise free and fair elections,
- concede defeat if the electorate so decides and
- hand over power to the opposition in that eventuality.

These formalities work quite well in India.

If citizens and their wishes are taken seriously, there is no alternative to liberal democracy and the pluralism it reflects and supports.

However, not all democracies meet the above criteria. In recent years we have often seen that

- Democracy does not prevent tyranny

Democracy does not prevent ethnic war

- Democracy does not necessarily promote economic growth and the accumulation of wealth

Democracy does not prevent corruption.

In short: it is possible to have what is termed an illiberal democracy. There are such democracies throughout the world. This explains why, seen from a global perspective and despite rapid increase in the number of nominal democracies throughout the world, there is no perceptible decrease in the number, scale and range of human rights abuses.

Democracy from a liberal point of view does **not** mean that everything should be subject to collective decision-making. This would make a mockery of freedom. Freedom, after all, is a condition in which "individuals decide for themselves". Communities, or elected representatives, should only act in fields in which individuals find it impossible to act in their best interests without the co-operation of others. In such circumstances democracy ensures that individuals maintain at least some influence over decisions that are made.

Having a say in decision-making, however, is not the same as deciding for oneself.

Seen from this perspective, democracy is the next best thing to freedom.

Democracy, properly understood and practised, means participation, but participation must be subject to the principle of subsidiarity - meaning that decisions should always be made at the lowest possible level. Where individuals can fend for themselves - and they are perfectly capable of so doing in most aspects of life - others, including governments, should not interfere. Interference always involves coercion, costs money and destroys structures of self-help and civil society. The trade-off is sometimes necessary - but not as often as most of our contemporaries think.

The challenge for liberals is to make democracy work for the benefit of citizens and individuals, their freedom and their material well being. That is also the challenge you are faced with in India. It does mean a number of things:

1. Avoiding the mistake of too much reliance on democracy. An important way of doing this is always to focus on **freedom first** – that is as you know the title of your magazine in India and proves the importance. Before issues are resolved by higher authorities or by law, liberals should ask themselves whether these issues warrant attention - even if this attention is by democratically elected bodies. Focusing on freedom means taking the principle of subsidiarity seriously.
2. Ensuring that government neither becomes too powerful, nor too bureaucratic, nor overstretches its capacity to do useful things. Citizens' initiative must be encouraged, not discouraged! What liberals want is a civil society in which citizens organise and run their own affairs, leaving only those tasks to government that manifestly they cannot fulfil.
3. Ensuring that real and viable political alternatives exist and continue to exist - through viable liberal policy alternatives, political organisation and effective campaigning;

4. Commitment to the rule of law; the rights of individuals and minorities and to a free market in goods and ideas as over-riding principles governing all social interaction.

I am well aware that you as members of the Indian Liberal Group do follow all this liberal principles and fight for its realisation in India, which is not an easy task.

Let me quickly turn to "Good governance". The word has been so widely used, in fact over used, and in the process its true meaning has become somewhat blurred. No one knows exactly what good governance is, but every one agrees it is something positive, something we all can agree to achieve. If you go through the speeches of politicians world over, even in India, be it government ministers, party spokesperson or opposition - all agree on good governance. Such an agreement by all political forces worries Liberals.

At the last congress of Liberal International the resolution on good governance sums up as follows:

"Authoritarian rule, abuse of power, corruption, protectionism and centralization make for bad government. Too many countries are kept poor -and their citizens kept ignorant- by a lack of democracy, education and effective economic and social policy. The liberal agenda for good governance focuses on returning power to individuals, separation of powers, decentralisation, transparency, civil and political rights, free trade, social market economy, policies against poverty and ignorance and the fight against corruption." That is the text agreed upon at the 51st Congress of Liberal International's meeting in Budapest, Hungary, in March this year.

I think this resolution contains numerous of challenges for the Indian Liberal Group if I look at and take into account the realities here in the country and the region.

Good governance is a situation wherein the will of citizens and their groups and organizations are recognised, making them free to organize and manage their way of life according to their own choice, free from any control or influence.

For liberals good governance is inexpensive. Therefore, the state should perform only such activities, which cannot be performed by the individual, by the private sector or by civil organizations. In other words governments must withdraw from any sort of business. Privatisation should therefore be encouraged. For liberals, the state is a bad owner and manager of business, and state property in the economy should be done away with.

I am pleased to note that many chapters of the Indian Liberal Group are actively working on those issues. The Bangalore chapter has asked for the state public transport to be privatised and even submitted a Public Transport policy to this effect.

Good governance is, for liberals, responsible, transparent, accountable, de-centralized and committed. Transparency of politics must be improved and absolutely supported.

Also, it is essential to bring the decision making process closer to citizens, and governance must therefore be de-centralized to regional and local authorities.

Governments should treat all citizens as equal, independent of their race, social status, views, or beliefs. Economic and social systems should provide equal opportunity for all citizens to access welfare and cultural goods. Good governance is for liberals also a just one.

Good governance, for liberals, combines freedom and security. International terrorism is often a product of nationalist and religious intolerance that runs contrary to all aspects of freedom and human dignity.

These are some of the Liberal values in the context of good governance. Promoting different aspects that will bring about good governance is what each one of us in this impressive gathering are trying to do in our own little way.

In my view it is the task of each Indian Liberal Group member to view and analyse your local problems and situations that stand in the way of bringing about effective or good

governance. Many, sometimes small but encouraging attempts have been made in this direction. There is for instance remarkable work in Gujarat on electoral reforms that would support more transparency in politics. This links up to many groups and activities all over the country.

I am sure there are more impressive activities that Indian Liberal Group chapters have achieved or are working on.

Yet, more can and must be done.

At this juncture allow me to express freely my views as a Liberal first, and as someone representing a Liberal Foundation as second on the Indian Liberal Group.

I feel it is very important for the Indian Liberal Group to have a clear and distinct image – what does the Indian Liberal Group represent? How effective have our attempts been to make this image clear with the public?

What is the objective of this group? Is the Indian Liberal Group a pressure group or does it wish to become a political party one day? The approach to both is so different that one should be as clear as possible from the very start.

How can we build and expand a network with other existing organisations doing similar work? How can the existing chapters be made more active and more visible to the outside world? What strategies are being adopted towards this end?

How can the flow of information be improved amongst the groups, and equally important, to the outside world?

What is your plan to get members active and motivated to go out there and do something to bring about a change? The movement can only grow when people are motivated to join, and people will only be motivated to join when they see concrete action taken by the Group.

Does the Indian Liberal Group have a clear plan of action for the next 3-5 years? Where do you see the Indian Liberal Group to be five years hence? What are you plan to do towards achieving that goal?

These are some questions I have been nurturing for some time. These only express my eagerness for the Indian Liberal Group to become a strong group with an impact whose opinions are taken note off.

The challenges as I see before the Indian Liberal Group is to pressure governments to ensure that democracy works for the benefit of citizens and enhancing their freedom.

The Indian Liberal Group must ensure citizen's initiatives are encouraged for a true civil society to exist so as to act as a check and balance on governments so to prevent them from becoming too strong or bureaucratic.

The Indian Liberal Group must be committed at all times to the rule of law, the rights of individuals and the minorities.

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation as a Foundation for Liberal Policies is here to assist in a meaningful way that will help grow and make the INDIAN LIBERAL GROUP to be truly the **Indian Liberal Movement**.

At this point I would like to express my appreciation to Mr. Raju for his untiring and dedicated work to bring back the Liberal movement in India.

The Indian Liberal Group is not alone in fighting for the realisation of liberal values.

At the moment there are 84 Liberal parties spread across 67 countries. Some Liberal parties have had a better fortune and are seen today participating in governments of countries as diverse as Belgium, Slovenia, Nicaragua, Senegal, Honduras, Taiwan and a few more. While, in other countries Liberals are the leading opposition parties. Yet still there are countries like Russia where our liberal partner is small but a strong opinion leader.

Not all the Liberal parties are however identical, there is a certain degree of political variance among them, since the political priorities of each of these parties are determined by the history of their country, their current economic and social situation and cultural factors. Having said that there is however a clear and strong common ground among all the Liberal parties and groups. The common grounds are based on human rights and democracy, social justice, tolerance, equality, market economy, free trade and a strong sense of international solidarity.

Ladies and gentlemen, Friends,

believing in people is an integral belief of a liberal democracy. Therefore our trust and faith in them must not be shaken the moment people appear to be different from oneself. Only if this rich pluralism is understood to be enriching society and not seen as a threat, only then can different peoples and groups are able to live peacefully and harmoniously together.

I believe the Indian Liberal Group can positively contribute towards making this happen.

Thank you for listening and your patience.

(*) Note: The author is indebted to Dr. Stefan Melnik as he has taken substantial parts from his paper: "Democracy and freedom: general observations from a liberal point of view".