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The Cambridge Union Society
9A Bridge Street
Cambridge, CB2 1UB

Email: press@cus.org

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Shami Chakrabarti addresses The Cambridge Union

“The existential challenge to our freedom is the threat to the Human Rights Act. Each and every right in it has been paid for with courage and blood.”

On Tuesday 17th November 2015, The Cambridge Union welcomed Shami Chakrabarti, director of Liberty and Chancellor of the University of Essex.

“We are meeting at a particular moment. It’s not a happy moment. It’s a very bleak moment. The world is mourning,” Chakrabarti told Union chambers, only four days after the terrorist attacks in Paris that left 129 dead and many more injured.

But Chakrabarti called for calm, measure and hope: “In my adult lifetime, I have lived through events like this before. I have lived through the troubles, but I have seen the fall of the Berlin Wall too. I lived through 9/11 and 7/7”.

“One hopes that democrats will keep their heads. That they will remember that we are a free and open society. Whether here in this historic chamber or in the UK or in France or anywhere else in the democratic world.”

Such calm and measure should shape the discussion on privacy and surveillance legislation.

“We are democracies. We do checks and balances to avoid abuses of power; when you are told that the innocent have nothing to fear about surveillance, please remember the hunger marches, Doreen Lawrence and the women in the environmental marches whose life were ruined by undercover police officers.”

We should also be united in our opposition to international terrorism: “We are each other’s greatest security.”

History further reminds us not to succumb to the current plans to scrap the “much-maligned” Human Rights Act 1998: “each and every right in it has been paid for by courage and blood”.

After World War II, “members of all religions and convictions came together in this one beautiful moment of history to produce The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

“What the modern Conservatives might like to remember is that the Declaration was Churchill’s greatest legacy.”

Shami Chakrabarti’s speech was, as she put it, **“a potted version of a potted book. A short book with large font. It is my story of being human rights activist during the war on terror. It looks at the past but also the time ahead.”**

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