INTERVIEW

Talking to a sphinx: An interview with Max van der Stoel

Walter Kemp

Max van der Stoel served as Foreign Minister of the Netherlands and was a human rights rapporteur on Iraq for the UN and on Greece for the Council of Europe. He was the first OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) and shaped that office. He is known for his discretion and often referred to as the ‘quiet diplomat’. In this interview, Van der Stoel speaks openly about his endeavours to promote human rights, freedom and security and opponents like the Greek Colonels and East European and Soviet Communists. Van der Stoel analyses current challenges in the area of human rights, security and national minorities as well: Kosovo, Transdniestria, Abhkazia or South Ossetia. He gives his views on territorial autonomy and independence, and on developments in Russia. Drawing on his wide-ranging experience as HCNM, he also comments on minority-related issues in Western Europe and on integrating diversity in multi-ethnic, multi-cultural states.

Shall I call you Sir Max? I understand that in November 2006 you became a Knight Commander of Saint Michael and Saint George.

Yes, that is true. I was not knighted in Buckingham Palace, but it is a high honour nevertheless. The citation was, in particular, for my work in the OSCE.

But I guess as a socialist you are not too concerned about imperial orders.

That is an irony. Nevertheless it is nice to be recognized for one’s work.

This journal looks at security and human rights, issues that you have been covering for most of your professional life. Let’s start with the Greek Colonels crisis. In 1968 you were rapporteur for the Council of Europe on this issue. You made a number of trips to the country and issued reports that made it clear that Greece was a full-blooded dictatorship. Why didn’t the colonels just tell you to go

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Greece was a member of the Council of Europe and the statue of the Council of Europe says very clearly that only states could be members of the Council if they are democracies and respect human rights. So they were in violation of the statute, and could have been suspended or expelled. Indeed, the regime was stupid enough in their public statements to make their real intentions clear. And it was evident to me, from talking to people under house arrest and in exile, how the government did not respect democratic principles. The challenge was to convince the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to suspend Greece, which it eventually did based on the findings of my reports.

By proclaiming me as ‘the communist’ threatening the vital interests of Greece, the colonels made my name widely known in the country and inadvertently turned me into something of a celebrity as the big leader of an international campaign against their regime, which was slightly exaggerated.

As Foreign Minister of the Netherlands you took part in the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in 1975. What was that like?

Obviously fascinating. It was fun to watch these 35 heads of state or government who were always used to being number one. And here they had to share the spotlight with 34 others who were also used to being the center of attention.

Henry Kissinger suggests that it was due to the persuasion of European human rights activists that the United States, despite its scepticism of the Helsinki process, agreed to invest political capital into the process in order to strengthen human rights.

I felt that in an agreement about the rules of co-existence with the communist states in Europe a reference to human rights could not be missed. I therefore instructed the Dutch delegation to continue to fight for this idea, and finally a reference to human rights was included in the so-called Basket III. Looking back, Kissinger writes in his book Diplomacy: ‘As it turned out, heroic reformers in Eastern Europe used Basket III as a rallying point in their fights to free these countries from Soviet domination’.

What was it like to negotiate with the Communists?

It was always a chilling experience. There was mutual politeness, but no human contact. I remember one exception. That was, for a few minutes, when I talked with Gromyko on the vital importance of non-proliferation.

In 1977 you visited Prague when you were Foreign Minister. Why?