**Anyiam Osigwe Foundation speech**

**Lagos, Nigeria, 27 March 2023**

It really is wonderful to be back here in Nigeria after a five year absence because this is a country where you don’t need a phrase book or google translate -  we share a language

  You don’t have any jet lag when you arrive from London because the almighty has brilliantly stationed us in the same time zone

  You don’t even need an adaptor plug for your lap top because Nigeria has had the wisdom to continue to use the classic chunky three pin British plug rather than those weedy EU two point varieties

 and you can even drink the local Guinness because this is one of the few cities in the world where they actually brew the inky nectar – even if I have to admit that Nigerian Guinness seems to be about ten degrees proof and has a kick that would knock them out in the bars of Dublin

 and of course that is just one of the reasons why Lagos is the Dublin of Africa

  why is Lagos the Dublin of Africa? Because they brew Guinness and it’s doublin’ every decade

Ok maybe that one needs work – but you get what I mean

  It is a particular honour to be here at the Anyiam Osigwe foundation and I want to pay tribute to the late Peace Anyiam Osigwe, who so sadly died in January

  Peace was a role model for women in the creative industries, and a role model for female leadership around the world

 In the spirit of this lecture series, I want to talk about human potential, about the way we unleash human potential – because that is the prime duty of teachers, of leaders, of politicians everywhere

   I want you to know that all my life I have been meditating on this question, of human potential – who has it, how is it distributed – and I began by learning some hard lessons

   In my first 18 months of existence I formed the view that the world revolved around me, and indeed I probably believed in my infantile narcissism that I had somehow created the world

and that everything and everybody else were incidental to my pleasure and benefit

  Then I experienced a shock, a terrible shock. Can you guess what happened?

  That’s right – my sister was born, and I had my first shattering detonation of my egotism and sexism, because it turned out that my sister was actually smarter than me

  or at least she was so quick at reading that she briefly overtook me, and I can remember what happened

 We are driving along in our Renault 4 when we come to a sign in the road and my father says, kids, what does that sign say – and I must be more than five and she is barely four

and I spell out the letters to myself GIVE WAY – and I know that if you have an e at the end then it lengthens the vowel before the consonant, and I deduce that the sign must be indicating the presence of a GIVEWAY a bit like a driveway

But my sister of course got it right

Give way, she said, as people say to me the whole time in the House of Commons. I gave way to her

and in that searing moment I abandoned all notions of male intellectual superiority

but I still coddled my native chauvinism, and for years I pathetically retained the idea that even if the sexes were intellectually equal then boys were somehow stronger than girls – yup, all boys were stronger than all girls

and at the age of about 7 I announced this theory in the playground of Primrose Hill primary school, Camden.

  All boys are stronger than all girls, I said, dementedly, like a prepubescent version of sid the sexist from viz magazine

   While everyone was laughing at me a tall girl called Tracy came up – she must have been only a year or so older but she seemed suddenly very big indeed

 I can’t remember exactly how Tracy physically proved I was wrong, but in a flash I was on my arse, and I remember looking up from the ground at this ring of happy laughing faces and feeling I was a total twerp

and I am very grateful to Tracy because she taught me that you shouldn’t be a sexist and you can’t generalise about human ability

  I did find some things easy, but then other children found other things very easy – when I was hopeless at them. I couldn’t play the recorder and I couldn’t dribble a football

 and I wondered, as we all do, to what extent I had any natural skllls or aptitudes, to what extent I was just the product of my parents’ energies or the excellence of my teachers

 I started to form a theory about the world, based on my own observation – that there was skill, aptitude, talent, ability everywhere, and pretty much evenly distributed throughout the population – but opportunity was not

 There was intelligence everywhere – what you call native wit – but not everyone had the chance to put it to use or show it off

and at the age of about 11 or 12 I found the words to express this idea. It was a poem by Thomas Gray, called Elegy written in a country churchyard

Gray is standing there at dusk, as the curfew tolls the knell of parting day, and he looks at the graves of these poor illiterate village folk. It’s about 1750 – long before universal education

and it occurs to him that they could have been contenders, these ignorant Buckinghamshire peasants. They could have been poets. They could have been statesmen. They could have been tech billionaires. They just never had the chance, says Gray wistfully, because no one taught them to read

  Full many a gem of purest ray serene

   The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear

 Full many a flower is born to blush unseen

  And waste its sweetness on the desert air

and I think he is right. The UK has a population of 66 m, and Nigeria maybe 200m. How many of our people are able to reach their full potential, and how many of them are like flowers that no one ever sees? How many have talents like jewels lost in the blackness of an undersea cave?

 I will tell you how many – a hell of a lot, millions, tens of millions, and the job of politicians is to create the conditions in which they can unleash that potential

because that is not only morally right – it’s surely right, if we care about human development, to give everyone the chance to express the talents that the lord has given them

It’s the right way for them to achieve happiness and fulfilment – and it’s the right thing for the economy, because we are seeing everywhere, in both our countries, a colossal waste of human potential

and all my political career – whether as Mayor of London or as PM has been about solving that mystery, unleashing that talent, excavating the gem from the darkened cave, letting people flower

   and the phenomenon we have seen in both our countries is that people in search of opportunity have migrated from the countryside to the cities, because that is where the jobs are

and that’s why London is the most productive city in the whole of Europe, and that’s why Lagos is doubling every decade

and I am honoured to speak in the presence of the governor of Lagos, and hope you won’t mind, your excellency, if I try to outline the crucial conditions for allowing talent to bloom and for cities to thrive

  Number one – it’s got to be safe, and you must have equality under the law, because that is the foundation of freedom

 I know the problems you face in Nigeria – the banditry in some parts of the country, and the lives that are being lost. But those bandits and terrorists must and can be defeated, and eventually law and order will prevail, and you know that the UK stands ready to help.

We have certainly had our problems with terrorism in the past, but

I am proud to say that London is one of the safest big cities in the world, and the Metropolitan Police are so impartial that they once arrested Prince Andrew himself – the son of our late queen – when they saw him loitering in the shrubbery in Buckingham palace

in what later turned out to be a case of mistaken identity

 I thought this was quite funny until a couple of years ago when the Met actually fined me – in circumstances that I still find almost too painful to describe – simply for standing at my desk, in the Cabinet room, and eating lunch

and for followers of British politics I want you to know that the fabled birthday cake – about which the BBC and the rest of the media fulminated for well over a year – remained unseen by me in a Tupperware box

 and look – whatever you may say about that episode, can you imagine the Moscow police arresting Vladimir Putin for having lunch, for 20 minutes, at his own desk? Can you imagine the Chinese police doing the same to Xi Jing Ping?

  Whatever else it shows, that decision by the Metropolitan police may have seemed to me to be bizarre, but it shows that the law is enforced in my country without fear and without favour

and that whoever you are, high or low, rich or poor, you will receive that same scrutiny and that same protection

  and that is the first and most crucial freedom and precondition for economic growth and investment – freedom under the law, the freedom to live your life as you choose, within the law, provided you do no harm to others

 and the next great freedom – an indispensable freedom – is the right to choose those who govern you, and the right to remove them from office

It’s called democracy, and it’s precious and it works, and of course it is under attack the whole time

  Why did Vladimir Putin decide to launch his evil and criminal onslaught on Ukraine, triggering the worst war in Europe for 80 years?

 Because he could see that the Ukrainians were choosing a different path – towards an open, liberal, democratic system – a different system from the one that he was permitting to the Russian people. And he could see that there was a risk in this for him,

 and that as Ukraine succeeded, and aligned ever more closely with the west, that the Russian people would themselves demand change, and that his own position would be under threat

  And why, by the way, did he miscalculate so badly? Why did he fail to foresee the heroic resistance of the Ukrainians – and they are going to win

   They have kicked him out of Kiev, of Kharkiv, of Kherson and I believe that this year 2023 they will be able – if we give them what they need – to kick him out of the whole country

  Why was Putin – normally thought of as a chess-like calculator – so dumb as to think he could roll up Ukraine in a week? He has now incapacitated almost a third of his armed forces and is running seriously low on ammunition

 How did he make this mistake? Precisely because he isn’t democratic

Because he was surrounded by yes-men and sycophants, he had no one to give him contrary advice, he had no backbenchers waiting to rebel

and that’s why in the words of Winston Churchill, democracy is the worst system in the world except for all the others

  and let me give you another proof of the value of the democratic system that we both operate

   Who has been vaccinated against covid? I mean no disrespect to anyone who had sputnik but the vaccines that actually worked were made in the liberal free market democracies

because that is where the best scientists want to live and because you are more likely to produce a genuine scientific breakthrough if you are interested in what the shareholders are going to say than if you are worried about what the politburo is going to say

  and that is the third crucial condition for releasing human potential. You need a society that is open and tolerant and where people do not face discrimination on grounds of religion or race or ethnicity or gender or sexual orientation

  In London about 40 per cent of the population is born abroad – including me, by the way and we speak more languages on the streets of London than anywhere except Nigeria

and that is why London is such a ferment of creative energy – like Lagos

We have more tech unicorns in the UK than France and Germany and Israel combined

 We have fin tech med tech bio tech nano tech green tech Aztec Toltec mixtec – it starts to sound like 15th century mexico

 and we have almost as many films made on the streets of London as in Hollywood itself – in fact I believe that London, Lagos and Los Angeles are the biggest centres for movie production in the world

  So you need freedom under the law, and security, and democracy and openness and tolerance – but even that is not enough

 To deliver equality of opportunity and to unleash human potential the state has two more giant tasks

  You need to allow talent to move – I mean physically move. You need people to move swiftly and cheaply from where they live to where they can maximise their talents

 It is one of the many blessings of living in London that in 1853 they came up with the idea of putting trains in tunnels, so that suddenly millions of people could move underground at high speed

and they didn’t have to wait in giant traffic jams of stationary horse-drawn carriages, with the dung piling higher and higher on the cobblestones

Today the mass transit system in London is so efficient that every morning it sucks in millions of people on tubes and trains and buses from far outside the capital, and then every evening it expels them like the digestive tract of a vast undersea coelenterate

so fast and so effortlessly that they get home for the children’s bath time and a gin and tonic

Your excellency, governor, I have spent enough time in Lagos to know that you have the occasional traffic jam

and I know that you are building a mass transit system – a metro, and all I can say is let’s do it together

 When I was mayor of London I increased the capacity of the tube by about 30 per cent and I built crossrail, the Elizabeth line, the biggest engineering project in Europe

don’t do it with the Spanish, don’t do it with the French – do it with TFL

and I read that you are interested in cable cars, because there is so much water to cross. I am proud to say that I built a cable car in less than a year – across the river from Greenwich to Silvertown

I took Arnold Schwarzenegger up in it and he looked down at Canning Town, and he said very nice –

 People made fun of me and said I had built a cable car from nowhere to nowhere but a year ago my Labour successor actually moved city hall itself to be near the cable car

and like all those other projects that cable car brought people closer to jobs, closer to opportunity, closer to fulfilment

and finally what is the most important thing the state can do to unleash potential?

what must the state do? what was the state failing to do in 1750 when Thomas Gray stood over the mouldering graves of the unlettered poor of the village of Stoke Poges?

 the state must educate – or at least the state must insist on education, for girls as well as boys

I am proud of the UK system, proud that we have four of the ten best universities in the world

with one Cambridge college boasting more nobel prizes than Russia and China combined

and it is a fantastic thing that so many Nigerian students choose the UK; but we still have too many British kids who cannot do basic arithmetic at the age of 11 or who are still not able properly to read and write

and I know that here in Nigeria you still have the nihilistic know-nothings of Boko haram and the Islamic state – people who literally believe that books are some sort of sacrilege

 who threaten to kill or maim young girls for wanting to read

and that is madness, that is evil, that is the extinction of human talent and potential

that is the exact opposite of what Peace Anyiam Osigwe stood for, the opposite of what this conference is all about

I know how much progress you have made in stamping that out those deranged and sexist terrorists and I am proud of what the UK has been able to do to help

and I want to end with this thought – that now is the time, when the world is so uncertain, when we see free trade breaking down between nations

when barriers are going up, when some nations are disentangling and decoupling from others

now is the time for the UK and Nigeria – two great democracies, with so much history in common – to do more together

we should be tackling climate change together

the technology is there. The UK is already one of the world’s greatest producers of offshore wind

Nigeria could be a renewables superpower as well as a massive producer of oil and gas

We have the solar technology, and you certainly have the sun

Our trade flows are increasing fast - we send you machine tools and

  you send us thermostats and oscilloscopes

we could do more, and we need to end exchange controls

   but the greatest triumphs of all are the things that we do together

the actors who are neither exclusively British nor exclusively Nigerian but somehow both at once

the Nollywood films that are financed in London

 the Ed Sheeran songs that he records with Fireboy DML

the Anglo-Nigerian boxers with the knock out punch and the knock out punch of the black beer that is neither British nor Nigerian but somehow both at once

  Let us stick up for the ideas that unite us – free speech, free trade, free elections

  not just because they are nice to have, not just because they feel like good things, but because they are demonstrably the best route to prosperity

Let’s recognise that our challenges are shared challenges – whether it’s climate change or the instability in the Sahel that triggers both the terrorism and the mass migration that washes up on the shores of the UK

and let’s tackle them together

 Let’s be proud of centuries of common history – from the Nigerians who fought for freedom in Europe in two world wars to the security and defence partnership we have with Nigeria today

Let’s deepen that partnership

 and let’s do more together to unleash the potential of the people of both our countries.

Here’s to the Nigeria-UK and thanks for listening