

**MICHEL CHIHA FOUNDATION: AWARD CEREMONY – MAY 13<sup>th</sup> 2017**

SPEECH OF MRS CLAUDE DOUMET SERHAL

Ladies and gentlemen,

Citizenship means being recognised by and having a voice in the prevailing political system. It is about a sense of belonging and membership, but crucially, it also has to embrace not only the principles of universal human rights but it must also include and uphold the right to be different.

Over the past century, the debate about what constitutes the Lebanese identity and what defines Lebanese citizenship has fuelled many heated arguments amongst scholars everywhere, both in Lebanon and abroad in an effort to find an adequate definition of who the Lebanese are and what type of society Lebanon is. This discussion reached its zenith when Lebanon descended into a civil war. Andree Chedid, in her 1976 *Ceremonial de la violence*, questioned the problem of the country's multiple identities by asking herself three questions? What type of society should Lebanon be identified with, which perspective should represent it and which voice should speak for it?

Today, globalisation has significantly changed the current social order and the growth in ethnical and religious diversity poses both opportunities and challenges to global policy-makers and to society as a whole. Intolerance and social exclusion is on the increase and this has led to social tensions and unrest. Education systems face in terms of tolerance, respect for diversity and active citizenship their biggest challenges yet. It has become increasingly obvious that there is no single model that can be universally applied and in other words there is no such thing as 'one size fits all', a concept which was already understood in Lebanon since the 1930's and the introduction of its Constitution to which Michel Chiha greatly contributed and which gave a model of institutional inventiveness.

With these challenges in mind, I would like to share with you a comment made by one of the teachers correcting this year's submissions. After listing a series of recommendations to the Chiha foundation, this teacher added and I quote: "lastly and above all, in good as well as in bad essays, the young people who submitted their work simply ignored State institutions despite the fact that one of this year's topics was about the "Parliamentary Assembly". It was as if these institutions did not exist or more importantly, are irrelevant. This is an obvious manifestation of the fact that for years now the Lebanese state has consistently failed its citizens. Nevertheless, in terms of the definition of multicultural citizenship, Lebanon is still at the forefront. Throughout its history this country has represented a unique experiment in multicultural and multireligious interdependence resulting in a balance of social forces which has been a stabilizing factor for the Lebanese state. This was Michel Chiha 's vision and his ambition for Lebanon and even today it can still set the world an example. Briefly, said Michel Chiha "Lebanon contains the most pronounced contrasts, the most varied mentalities, the most disparate customs, and the least uniform faces. It is a microcosm of humanity".

A communal school system can promote a stronger sense of belonging in all the communities of the society however, as pointed out by Joseph Maïla in 2005, the biggest problem is “the distinctive passiveness of the Lebanese citizen who does not engage towards change”. Despite political developments that occur in the region, a number of successive wars have taught us that no one culture can impose its values over the other. If they desire a change, the Lebanese and in particular its younger generation must speak up for themselves and accommodate the grievances, fears and concerns of everyone by beginning a common dialogue, not a political debate, on how a functioning equilibrium can be reached for all concerned.