

The Chancellor's Lecture for 1995

Karl Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies* in the contemporary global world

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Chancellor,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some time ago a wise old man came to see me in Prague and I listened to him with admiration. Shortly afterwards I heard that this man had died. His name was Karl Popper. He was a world traveller who followed the biggest war ever waged by humankind – the war unleashed by the tribal fury of Nazi ideology – from this country, from New Zealand. It was here that he thought about the state of the world, and it was here that he wrote his most important books. Undoubtedly influenced by the harmonious co-existence of people of different cultures on these islands, he posed the question why it was so difficult for the idea of an open society to prevail against wave after wave of tribalism, and inquired into the spiritual background of all enemies of open society and into the patterns of their thinking. Addressing you on this ceremonial occasion, I should like to offer a few remarks on Sir Karl Popper's thoughts and thus pay tribute to the recently deceased thinker.

One of the targets of Popper's profound criticism – which he supported by ample evidence – was a phenomenon he called holistic social engineering. He used this term to describe human attempts to change the world for the better completely and globally, on the basis of some preconceived ideology that purported to understand all the laws of historical development and to describe inclusively, comprehensively and holistically a state of affairs that would be the ultimate realization of these laws. Popper clearly demonstrated that this pattern of human thinking and behaviour can only lead to a totalitarian system.

I come from a country that lived under a Communist regime for several decades. On the basis of my own experience, I can therefore confirm that Sir Karl Popper was right. In the beginning was an allegedly scientific theory of historical laws; that Marxist theory

subsequently gave rise to the Communist utopia, the vision of a paradise on Earth, and the latter eventually produced the gulags, the endless suffering of many nations, the endless violation of the human being. Anything that in any way opposed the vision of the world offered by Communism, thus calling that vision into question or actually proving it wrong, was mercilessly crushed. Needless to say, life, with its unfathomable diversity and unpredictability, never allowed itself to be squeezed into the crude Marxist cage. All that the guardians of the cage could do was to suppress and destroy whatever they could not make fit into it. Ultimately, war had to be declared on life itself and its innermost essence. I could give you thousands of concrete examples of how all the natural manifestations of life were stifled in the name of an abstract, theoretical vision of a better world. It was not just that there were what we call human rights abuses. This enforced vision led to the moral, political and economic devastation of all of society.

Instead of such holistic engineering, Popper argued for a gradual approach, an effort to improve incrementally the institutions, mechanisms and techniques of human coexistence, to improve them by remaining constantly in touch with life and constantly enriching our experience. Improvements and changes must be made according to whatever has proved to be good, practical, desirable and meaningful, without the arrogant presumption that we have understood everything about this world, and thus know everything there is to know about how to change it for the better.

In my country, one of the understandable reactions to the tragic experience of Communism is the opinion we sometimes encounter that man should, if possible, refrain altogether from changing or ameliorating the world, from devising long-range concepts, strategic plans or visions. All this is seen as part of the armoury of holistic social engineering. This opin-

ion, of course, is a grave error. Paradoxically, it has much in common with the fatalism Popper finds in those who believe they have grasped the laws of history and that they serve those laws. This fatalism takes the form of the peculiar idea that society is no more than a machine that, once properly set in motion, can then run on its own, automatically and permanently.

I am opposed to holistic social engineering. I refuse, however, to pour out the baby with the bath water and I am a long way from thinking that people should give up altogether on a constant search for ways of improving the world in which they must live together. It must be done even though they may never achieve more than partial improvements in particular areas, will always have to wait to see whether the change was the right thing to do, and must always be prepared to rectify whatever life has shown to be wrong.

Recently I expressed this opinion in the presence of a philosopher friend of mine. He looked somewhat puzzled at first, and then began trying to persuade me of something I have never denied, that the world, in its very essence, is a holistic entity; that everything in it is interconnected; that whatever we do in any one place has an unfathomable impact everywhere, though we may not see the whole of it; that even the post-modern science of these days supplies evidence of that.

With this remark, my friend has compelled me to supplement what I said, and perhaps even what Popper wrote. Yes, it is true that society – the world, the universe, being itself – is a deeply mysterious phenomenon, held together by billions of mysterious interconnections. Knowing all this and humbly accepting it is one thing; the arrogant belief that humanity, or the human spirit or reason, can grasp and describe the world in its entirety and derive from this description a vision of its improvement is something else altogether. It is one thing to be aware of the interconnection of all events; believing that we have fully understood this is something completely different.

In other words: I believe, as Popper does, that neither politicians, nor scientists, nor entrepreneurs, nor anyone else should fall for the vain belief that they can grasp the world as a whole and change it as a whole by one single action. Seeking to improve it, people should proceed with utmost caution and sensitivity, on a step-by-step basis, always paying attention to what each change actually brings about. At the same time, however, I believe – possibly differing from Popper's views to some extent – that as they do so, they should constantly bear in mind all the global

interrelations that they are aware of, and know that beyond their knowledge there exists an infinitely wider range of interrelations. My relatively brief sojourn in the realm of so-called high politics convinces me time and again of the need to take this very approach: most of the threats hanging over the world now, as well as many of the problems confronting it, could be handled much more effectively if we were able to see past the ends of our noses and take into consideration, to some extent at least, the broader interconnections that go beyond the scope of our immediate or group interests. This awareness, of course, should never become an arrogant utopian conviction that we alone possess the whole truth about these interconnections. On the contrary, it should emanate from a deep and humble respect for them and for their mysterious order.

My country is now witnessing a debate about the role of intellectuals: about how important or how dangerous they are, about the degree to which they can be independent, about how much or in what ways they should become engaged in politics. At times, the debate has been confused, partly because the word 'intellectual' means different things to different people. This is closely related to what I have just said here.

Let me try – just for the moment – to define an intellectual. To me, an intellectual is a person who has devoted his or her life to thinking in more general terms about the affairs of this world and the broader context of things. Of course, it is not only intellectuals who do this. Intellectuals, however, do it – if I may use the word – professionally. That is, their principal occupation is studying, reading, teaching, writing, publishing, addressing the public. Often – though certainly not always! – this makes them more receptive toward more general issues; often – though by far not always! – it leads them to embrace a broader sense of responsibility for the state of the world and its future.

If we accept this definition of an intellectual, then it will come as no surprise that many an intellectual has done a great deal of harm to the world. Taking an interest in the world as a whole and feeling an increased sense of responsibility for it, intellectuals often yield to the temptation to attempt grasping the world as a whole, explaining it entirely and offering universal solutions to its problems. An impatience of mind and a variety of mental short-cuts are the usual reasons why intellectuals tend to devise holistic ideologies and succumb to the seductive power of holistic social engineering. For that matter – were not the forerunners of Nazi ideology, the founders of Marx-

ism, and the first Communist leaders intellectuals par excellence? Did not a number of dictators, and even some terrorists – from the leaders of the former German Red Brigades to Pol Pot start off as intellectuals? Not to mention the many intellectuals who, though they neither created nor introduced dictatorships, time and again failed to stand up to them because they were more than others prone to accept the delusion that there was a universal key to eliminating human woes. It was to describe this phenomenon that the expression *trahison des clercs* – ‘the betrayal of the intellectuals’ – was coined. The many different anti-intellectual campaigns in my country have always supported their case with reference to this type of intellectual. And it is from there that they derive their belief that an intellectual is a biological species dangerous to humankind.

Those who claim this are committing an error very similar to the one committed by those whose utter rejection of socialist planning leads them to reject any conceptual thinking whatsoever.

It would be nonsense to believe that all intellectuals have succumbed to utopianism or holistic engineering. A great number of intellectuals both past and present have done precisely what I think should be done: they have perceived the broader context, seen things in more global terms, recognized the mysterious nature of globality and humbly deferred to it. Their increased sense of responsibility for this world has not made such intellectuals identify with an ideology; it has made them identify with humanity, its dignity and its prospects. These intellectuals build people-to-people solidarity. They foster tolerance, struggle against evil and violence, promote human rights and argue for their indivisibility. In a word, they represent what has been called ‘the conscience of society’. They are not indifferent when people in an unknown country on the other side of the planet are annihilated, or when children starve there, nor are they unconcerned about global warming and whether future generations will be able to lead an endurable life. They care about the fate of virgin forests in faraway places, about whether or not humankind will soon destroy all its non-renewable resources or whether a global dictatorship of advertisement, consumerism and blood-and-thunder stories on TV will ultimately lead the human race to a state of complete idiocy.

And where do intellectuals stand in relation to politics? There have been many misunderstandings

about that, too. My opinion is simple: when meeting with utopian intellectuals, we should make every effort not to give in to their siren calls. If they enter politics, we should believe them even less. The other type of intellectuals – those who know about the ties that link everything in this world together, who approach the world with humility, but also with an increased sense of responsibility, who wage a struggle for every good thing – should be listened to with the greatest attention, regardless of whether they work as independent critics, holding up a much needed mirror to politics and power, or are directly involved in politics. These two roles are very different from each other. My friend Timothy Garton Ash, with whom I have been discussing this subject for years, is certainly right about that. But while this is clearly so, it does not follow that we should bar such intellectuals from the realm of politics on the pretext that they only belong at universities or in the media. On the contrary: I am deeply convinced that the more such people engage directly in practical politics, the better our world will fare. By its very essence, politics induces those who work in it to focus their attention on short-term issues that have a direct bearing on the next elections instead of on what will happen a hundred years from now. It compels them to pursue group interests rather than the interests of the human community as a whole, to say things that please everyone and not those which people are not so happy to hear, to treat even truth itself with caution. But this is not a sign that intellectuals have no place in politics. It is instead a challenge to draw into it as many of them as possible. After all, who is better equipped to decide about the fate of this globally interconnected civilization than someone who is most keenly aware of these interconnections, who pays the greatest regard to them, who takes the most responsible attitude toward the world as a whole?

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a magnificent feeling to know that a man can think about the problems of our world and read works by an outstanding philosopher in the Czech Republic, tens of thousands of kilometres away from here, and then, just a few hours later, share his thoughts with a receptive audience here in New Zealand, where that philosopher once wrote his books. I am grateful to you for offering me this opportunity and I am grateful to Victoria University for allowing me to consider myself as of this day a New Zealand Doctor.

