Vote of thanks

Peter Munz

Maggie Thatcher claimed that it was she who inaugu-
rated the policies which led to the liberation of eastern
Europe from Communist tyranny. As usual, Maggie
Thatcher was wrong.

The first step towards that liberation was taken
here in New Zealand in the early forties, when Karl
Popper wrote his *The Open Society and its Enemies*, in
Christchurch.

In order to understand the impact of that book - the
long term effects of which Mr Havel has stressed and
explained - we have to look back. In the thirties, open
societies and the practice of democracy were not held in
high esteem. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that at
that time even the best people were hoping that democ-

racy would be replaced by a form of government envis-
aged by Plato - where Platonic justice, presided over by
omnipotent and omniscient guardians, would reign su-
preme. People on the left harboured such hopes because
they took it that democracy was nothing more than a
cloak which allowed the rich to exploit the poor; and
people on the right harboured such hopes because they
found that democracy allowed too much power to the
disorderly mob. It was to combat these influences and
that unholy alliance between the right and the left that
Popper set out to expose the fatal flaws in Plato's political
thought. Plato had always occupied high moral ground
through his promise to replace the idiocies of all forms of
government by the rule of justice. Popper not only dem-

onstrated the impossibility of establishing justice by gov-
ernment decree because nobody can be omniscient, but
also showed that Plato had been writing in bad faith.

In the early forties, Christchurch was an ideal place
for such a challenge to Platonism. In the quietness of that
antipodean garden city, Plato was not exactly a hot is-

sue. Nobody took much notice of what Popper was do-
ing. He was left entirely undisturbed in his overhual of
the traditional wisdom which had equated Plato with the
ultimate concern for morals and justice. Dr Broadhead, a very learned classical scholar at Can-
terbury College, was the only person to be shocked. But he
was Popper's friend and, I think, in his heart forgave
Popper for the demolition of the idol.

I myself, I must confess, though not exactly shocked,
was astonished by Popper's audacity to question the
moral stature of Plato. I had been brought up with a
good classical education and had taken it for granted
that Plato’s moral ground was indeed high and certainly
higher than that of our open society which tolerated so
much injustice to the lower classes. It was over the dif-
fferences in our assessment of Plato that Popper and I
first met. I became his pupil and eventually a life-long
friend because Popper, like a really good teacher took
me seriously and made me feel that it was really impor-
tant for me to see how misplaced my trust in Plato was.

The link between Popper and New Zealand was by
no means purely fortuitous. Popper greatly admired the
egalitarianism of New Zealand's social democracy as it
had been established by Michael Savage and Peter Fraser.

During the First War, Fraser had been in jail for sedition
and Victoria's Sir Thomas Hunter visited him every week
to supply him with books. And this links Victoria Uni-
versity to Popper's admiration for Fraser's achievement.

The other person Popper admired was Masaryk, the
first President of the Republic of Czechoslovakia, as it
then was, Mr Havel's great and first predecessor - an
intellectual of the good kind, whose importance in polit-
tics Mr Havel stressed in his lecture.

So here we are at Victoria University, half a century
later, listening to Mr Havel on Popper. We are linked to
Popper through Hunter's work for Fraser's social de-

mocracy which Popper admired; and Popper is linked to
Mr Havel through his admiration of Masaryk. And Mr
Havel, from today onwards a Doctor of this University,
has been addressing us on the power and wisdom of
Popper's political philosophy. It is as if Mr Havel's pres-
ence here today is the culminating link in a chain of
events which began when Hunter coached Peter Fraser
in jail during the First World War.

Today in New Zealand, Popper is all but forgotten
and the 50th anniversary of the first publication of *The
Open Society* is being allowed to pass without notice.

When Popper died last year, I wrote to both the Vice-
Chancellor and the Chairman of the Philosophy Depart-
ment of Canterbury University to suggest that his work
in our country be celebrated. The Vice-Chancellor did
not bother to reply and the Chairman wrote to inform
me that nobody was interested in Popper. We must there-
fore be doubly and specially grateful to Mr Havel to take
the trouble to come all this way from Prague to remind
us of the major contribution that was made in our coun-
try to the cause of global freedom and the promotion of
open societies.