

# Vote of thanks

Peter Munz

Maggie Thatcher claimed that it was she who inaugurated 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 democracy would be replaced by a form of government envisaged by Plato - where Platonic justice, presided over by omnipotent and omniscient guardians, would reign supreme. 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 demonstrated the impossibility of establishing justice by government 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 issue. Nobody took much notice of what Popper was doing. He was left entirely undisturbed in his overhaul of the traditional wisdom which had equated Plato with the ultimate concern for morals and justice. Dr Broadhead, a very learned classical scholar at Canterbury 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 differences 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 important 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 University 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 politics 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 democracy 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 presence 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 Department 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 therefore 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 country to the cause of global freedom and the promotion of open societies.