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The Hon. George Brandis QC

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Isaiah Berlin and the defence of liberty

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The text below was delivered as the 2019 Isaiah Berlin lecture at the Latvian Embassy in London on 4 July 2019. Her Excellency Baiba Braze, Ambassador of Latvia to the United Kingdom, who inaugurated this annual lecture series, says: 'Sir Isaiah Berlin was born in Riga and was a Latvian citizen, part of our nation and state. Latvia's 100-year history proves that only freedom for the country and nation guarantees individual or collective liberties. They are preconditions for successful development. My dear colleague George Brandis in his lecture proved that these values still stand and are as relevant today as they were in Sir Isaiah's time.'

Sir Isaiah Berlin, the 100th anniversary of whose birth this lecture commemorates, was one of the most important, most civilized, and most influential liberal voices of the twentieth century. As we approach the dawn of the second decade of the twenty-first century, with liberal values and liberal societies under attack from seemingly every quarter, Berlin's eloquent defence of human liberty could not be more relevant and the power of his critique of the enemies of freedom more urgent.

Isaiah Berlin was born to a family of relatively prosperous Jewish merchants in Riga, in what was then the Russian province of Latvia, on 6 June 1909. With the outbreak of war in 1914, the family fled to the Russian city of Petrograd, where they were caught up in the revolution of 1917. He is the only person I ever met who was able to tell me about the Russian revolution from personal experience: I still remember his description of how, as an eight-year-old boy, he watched from the window of his family's apartment as the Bolshevik mobs surged through the streets below. They endured the chaos of the next few years in a state of constant peril, being both Jews and bourgeois, until in 1921 they seized the opportunity to do so, first back to Riga, by now the capital of the newly-independent nation of Latvia, and then make their way to the security and tranquillity of England. They settled in south London. The young Isaiah Berlin loved England and its ways, and he remained an Englishman for the rest of his life.

He was a prodigiously gifted scholar and an undergraduate at Corpus Christi College, Oxford to understand the political thought of every major thinker. He was close to Churchill and Macaulay's history of England. He went up to Oxford in 1928 to be an old boy, he watched from the window of his family's apartment as the Bolshevik mobs surged through the streets below. They endured the chaos of the next few years in a state of constant peril, being both Jews and bourgeois, until in 1921 they seized the opportunity to do so, first back to Riga, by now the capital of the newly-independent nation of Latvia, and then make their way to the security and tranquillity of England. They settled in south London. The young Isaiah Berlin loved England and its ways, and he remained an Englishman for the rest of his life.


In his early life, he became close to Churchill and Macaulay's history of England. He went up to Oxford in 1928 to be an old boy, he watched from the window of his family's apartment as the Bolshevik mobs surged through the streets below. They endured the chaos of the next few years in a state of constant peril, being both Jews and bourgeois, until in 1921 they seized the opportunity to do so, first back to Riga, by now the capital of the newly-independent nation of Latvia, and then make their way to the security and tranquillity of England. They settled in south London. The young Isaiah Berlin loved England and its ways, and he remained an Englishman for the rest of his life.

The President then left. The reason for his peculiar behaviour became clear the following morning: earlier that day, Kennedy had first been briefed on the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba. The President was considering his response. We now know that his skilful and measured manoeuvres over the following thirteen days, which ended with Khrushchev's back-down, averted nuclear catastrophe. We will never know what, if anything, Berlin contributed to Kennedy's thinking in judging the Russian reaction. However, we do know that when, after the crisis was over, the President himself held a small dinner party to celebrate, Berlin was among the select few invited. Two decades later, he was invited to another dinner party hosted by the American journalist John F. Kennedy. The guest of honour was Al Gore's good friend John F. Kennedy. The President arrived late and seemed uncharacteristically distracted and subdued. Throughout the dinner, his only conversation was to quiz Berlin about Russia and, in particular, what Russian history taught us about that country's reaction to crises. After dinner, he took Berlin aside and continued the interrogation. What did Russians typically do when backed into a corner, the President wanted to know? Berlin later said of the conversation:

'I never knew a man who listened to every single word that one uttered more attentively. His eyes protruded slightly, he leaned forward uncharacteristically distracted and subdued. Throughout the dinner, his only conversation was to quiz Berlin about Russia and, in particular, what Russian history taught us about that country's reaction to crises. After dinner, he took Berlin aside and continued the interrogation. What did Russians typically do when backed into a corner, the President wanted to know? Berlin later said of the conversation:

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his attention for most of the night. It was a rare privilege. The conversation was, of course, wonderful. He told me that he had just finished a work on Marx, a book that he found unusual and compelling in the context of modern political philosophy.

When Marx first devoted his efforts to the critique of Marxism as such -- so far as I know, his book on Marx is the only sustained treatment specifically of Marxism in its essence -- but to a broader and even more consequential topic: the destruction of ideology itself, and the refutation to human liberty which ideologically-driven leaders may represent. His fear of the potentially devastating consequences of ruthlessly ideological government, in crushing individual humanity in the service of utopian abstractions, may have had its seed in his own childhood experience in Petrograd.

It was likely influenced by his embrace of the liberal English culture of his youth and, in particular, the Whig tradition which he absorbed from Macaulay. It was, perhaps, influenced by his early exposure to logical positivism, a vogue among some of his contemporaries among Oxford philosophers such as A.J. Ayer, which demanded that all propositions be empirically verifiable -- although that did not prevent some of the positivists from falling for Marxism themselves. It was, undoubtedly, given focus by the writings of the Russian nineteenth-century liberal writer and political activist, Alexander Herzen, whose work he discovered when he was a young man. Herzen's work resonated with Berlin's sensibilities, and he found an immense sympathy with the author of this book.

It also clearly bears the strong influence of another great philosopher born on the shores of the Baltic, Immanuel Kant, and in particular the doctrine known to scholars of Kant as the second Categorical Imperative: 'Treat every person as an end in themselves, and not merely as a means to an end.'

Whatever the tributary streams of Berlin's thinking, the belief in the intransigibility of the human person, and his acute awareness of the risk that dogmatic adherence to rigid ideological formularies by leaders and ideologues may lead to the crushing of individual men and women for the sake of some purely abstract end -- is the very beauty of Isaiah Berlin's liberalism.

Perhaps Berlin's most widely read work in his Inaugural Lecture as Chiefiee Professor of Social Political Theory, at Oxford in 1958, subsequently published under the title 'Two Concepts of Liberty.' In the sixty years since, it has been a staple of almost every student primer on twentieth-century political philosophy.

The following passage -- from some of which I quoted in my maiden speech to the Australian Senate in 2000 -- captures the essence of Berlin's thinking, and demonstrates the influence of Kant in shaping his belief in the true basis of political liberty, rooted in the inviolability of the individual.

'If the essence of men is that they are autonomous beings -- authors of values, of ends in themselves, the ultimate authority of which consists precisely in the fact that they are willed freely -- then nothing is worse than to treat them as if they were not autonomous, but natural objects, played on by causal influences, creatures at the mercy of external stimuli, whose choices can be manipulated by their rulers. ... To treat men in this way is to treat them as if they were not self-determined. Nobody may enslave a man to be happy in his own way,' said Kant. 'Paternalism is the greatest despotism imaginable.' This is where, as many political philosophers, including Berlin, find themselves when they think about the nature of human freedom and the duties of the state.

Of course, most political leaders claim to want to change their society, and invariably they claim that it is for the better. It is not uncommon, as such, to find them -- like the French Revolutionaries, or the Bolsheviks, or the Nazis, or the Stasi, or the Communist Party of China, or the Khmer Rouge, or the apartheid government of South Africa, or the Soviet Union, or the Ba'ath Party, or the Taliban, or anyone else who claims to be driven by a vision of a better world and a better society -- behaving as if their ends are less than themselves. But that is the cost of human freedom.

Berlin's defense of the individual was not just a defense of the individual, but a defense of the human individual. It was a defense of human freedom, of human dignity, of human self-determination.

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do that in the first place blind, because the future is uncertain; and in the second place vicious, because it offends against the only moral values we know; because it tramples on human demands in the name of abstractions — freedom, happiness, justice — fanatical generalisations, mystical sounds, isolated sets of words.

... One of the greatest of sins that any human being can perpetrate is to seek to transfer moral responsibility from his own shoulders to those of an unpredictable future order, and in the name of something which may never happen, perpetrate crimes today which no one would deny to be monstrous if they were performed for some egoistic purpose, and do not seem so only because they are sanctified by faith in some remote and intangible Utopia.

This is the essence of Isaiah Berlin's fusion of the Kantian doctrine of the inviolability of the person with his well-grounded fear of the ideological tyrant. In his certainty by a metaphysics which brooks no argument, which may — and, as history teaches us, almost certainly does — lead to the sacrifice of men and women on the altar of mere ideas. As a child in revolutionary Petrograd, he had seen it with his own eyes. As an Oxford don, he had observed it, in monsters like Lenin, Stalin and Hitler, and studied its philosophical antecedents. And, by the way, he had seen it in the academy as well, as some of his academic colleagues, like Isaac Deutscher, E.H. Carr and Eric Hobsbawm sought, with chilling indifference, to justify that slaughter in the name of a Marxist Utopia that never came.

So the teachings of Isaiah Berlin are, at heart, a plea for tolerance, an eloquent and emphatic warning against systems of government based upon an ideology, rooted in a metaphysical scheme so comprehensive that it distorts the way we see and as obstacles to it.

His defence of freedom of thought and expression leads us to a somewhat similar conclusion to that of John Stuart Mill in On Liberty but, it is important to note, from an entirely different set of premises and process of reasoning. It should never be forgotten that Mill's defence of liberty was avowedly based upon utilitarianism. Berlin, for whom the end never justified the means, bases his defence of freedom on much stickier ground: on an a priori conviction, traceable ultimately to Kant, of the moral inviolability of the human person, seasoned by a pragmatic and undogmatic reading of history — in particular, the bloody recent history of his own country.

An epigram of Kant's captures Berlin's own richer, more modest, more tolerant vision: 'from the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.' Berlin valued the uniqueness of every individual man and woman; he defended the inviolability of every human soul; he rejoiced in the variety and diversity of humanity; and he understood, better than almost any other twentieth-century political philosopher, the shocking inhumanity of violating that individuality by seeking to torture humanity into rigid conformity, the better to fit a political system. No twentieth-century liberal thinker of whom I am aware made the case for liberty so persuasively or so compellingly.

Only last week, President Vladimir Putin declared in an interview with an English newspaper that 'the liberal idea has become obsolete.' President Putin is not the only world leader today who seems to think so. I can only say that I believe he is wrong. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly true that the liberal order does at the moment appear to be under threat — both from hostile foreign actors and, alarmingly, in some instances from within the liberal democracies themselves, as traditional liberal values, such as freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and intellectual freedom come under attack. It has not been my purpose in this lecture to offer a view of why that is so. Rather has it been my purpose to speak, with undiluted admiration and indeed enthusiasm, about the work of Isaiah Berlin. In reflecting upon Berlin's life and work, I hope that I have been able to remind those who have been good enough to come tonight why the liberal ideal is so valuable, why individual liberty is so precious, why its defence is so vital and — perhaps more urgently today than for many years — to remind us, in particular, as Berlin so often and so eloquently did, of the terrible consequences which befell humanity when liberal ideals are thwarted or forgotten.

* His Excellency the Hon. George Brandis QC is the Australian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. He was previously a Liberal Party Senator for Queensland, 2000–18, serving as a Minister in the Howard, Abbott, and Turnbull Governments, including as Attorney-General for Australia, 2013–17.

2. Ibid., p. 42.
5. Ibid., p. 244.
6. Ibid., p. 283.
10. See in particular his critique of historical determinism in 'Historical Inevitability', ibid., pp. 94–105.
13. This phrase was used in the title of one of the collected volumes of Berlin's essays, which elaborate the point: The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas (London: John Murray, 1990).