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POLITICS, MORALITY, AND CIVILITY

~~there anything that citizens — and this is doubly true of~~
 politicians — should be more concerned about, ultimately,
 than trying to make life more pleasant, more interesting,
 more varied, and more bearable?

IF I TALK here about my political — or, more precisely, my
 civil — program, about my notion of the kind of politics
 and values and ideals I wish to struggle for, this is not to say
 that I am entertaining the naive hope that this struggle may
 one day be over. A heaven on earth in which people all love
 each other and everyone is hard-working, well-mannered,
 and virtuous, in which the land flourishes and everything
 is sweetness and light, working harmoniously to the satis-
 faction of God: this will never be. On the contrary, the world
 has had the worst experiences with utopian thinkers who
 promised all that. Evil will remain with us, no one will ever
 eliminate human suffering, the political arena will always
 attract irresponsible and ambitious adventurers and char-
 latans. And man will not stop destroying the world. In this
 regard, I have no illusions.

Neither I nor anyone else will ever win this war once and
 for all. At the very most, we can win a battle or two — and
 not even that is certain. Yet I still think it makes sense to
 wage this war persistently. It has been waged for centuries,
 and it will continue to be waged — we hope — for centuries
 to come. This must be done on principle, because it is the
 right thing to do. Or, if you like, because God wants it that
 way. It is an eternal, never-ending struggle waged not just
 by good people (among whom I count myself, more or less)
 against evil people, by honourable people against dis-
 honourable people, by people who think about the world
 and eternity against people who think only of themselves
 and the moment. It takes place inside everyone. It is what
 makes a person a person, and life, life.

So anyone who claims that I am a dreamer who expects
 to transform hell into heaven is wrong. I have few
 illusions. But I feel a responsibility to work towards the
 things I consider good and right. I don't know whether
 I'll be able to change certain things for the better, or not
 at all. Both outcomes are possible. There is only one thing
 I will not concede: that it might be meaningless to strive in
 a good cause.

WE ARE building our country anew. Fate has thrust me into
 a position in which I have a somewhat greater influence on
 that process than most of my fellow citizens do. It is appro-
 priate, therefore, that I admit to my notions about what
 kind of country it should be, and articulate the vision that
 guides me — or rather, the vision that flows naturally from
 politics as I understand it.

Perhaps we can all agree that we want a state based on
 rule of law, one that is democratic (that is, with a pluralistic
 political system), peaceful, and with a prospering market
 economy. Some insist that this state should also be socially
 just. Others sense in the phrase a hangover from socialism
 and argue against it. They object to the notion of "social
 justice" as vague, claiming that it can mean anything at all,
 and that a functioning market economy can never guaran-
 tee any genuine social justice. They point out that people
 have, and always will have, different degrees of industrious-
 ness, talent, and, last but not least, luck. Obviously, social
 justice in the sense of social equality is something the
 market system cannot, by its very nature, deliver. Moreover,
 to compel the marketplace to do so would be deeply immo-
 ral. (Our experience of socialism has provided us with more
 than enough examples of why this is so.)

I do not see, however, why a democratic state, armed with
 a legislature and the power to draw up a budget, cannot

strive for a certain fairness in, for example, pension policies or tax policies, or support to the unemployed, or salaries to public employees, or assistance to the elderly living alone, people who have health problems, or those who, for various reasons, find themselves at the bottom of society. Every civilized state attempts, in different ways and with different degrees of success, to come up with reasonable policies in these areas, and not even the most ardent supporters of the market economy have anything against it in principle. In the end, then, it is a conflict not of beliefs, but rather of terminology.

I am repeating these basic, self-evident, and rather general facts for the sake of completeness and order. But I would like to say more about other aspects of the state that may be somewhat less obvious and are certainly much less talked about, but are no less important — because they qualify and make possible everything that is considered self-evident.

I am convinced that we will never build a democratic state based on rule of law if we do not at the same time build a state that is — regardless of how unscientific this may sound to the ears of a political scientist — humane, moral, intellectual and spiritual, and cultural. The best laws and the best-conceived democratic mechanisms will not in themselves guarantee legality or freedom or human rights — anything, in short, for which they were intended — if they are not underpinned by certain human and social values. What good, for instance, would a law be if no one respected it, no one defended it, and no one tried responsibly to follow it? It would be nothing but a scrap of paper. What use would elections be in which the voter's only choice was between a greater and a lesser scoundrel? What use would a wide variety of political parties be if not one of them had the general interest of society at heart?

No state — that is, no constitutional, legal, and political

system — is anything in and of itself, outside historical time and social space. It is not the clever technical invention of a team of experts, like a computer or a telephone. Every state, on the contrary, grows out of specific intellectual, spiritual, and cultural traditions that breathe substance into it and give it meaning.

So we are back to the same point: without commonly shared and widely entrenched moral values and obligations, neither the law, nor democratic government, nor even the market economy will function properly. They are all marvellous products of the human spirit, mechanisms that can, in turn, serve the spirit magnificently — assuming that the human spirit wants these mechanisms to serve it, respects them, believes in them, guarantees them, understands their meaning, and is willing, if necessary, to fight for them or make sacrifices for them.

Again I would use law as an illustration. The law is undoubtedly an instrument of justice, but it would be an utterly meaningless instrument if no one used it responsibly. From our own recent experience we all know too well what can happen to even a decent law in the hands of an unscrupulous judge, and how easily unscrupulous people can use democratic institutions to introduce dictatorship and terror. The law and other democratic institutions ensure little if they are not backed up by the willingness and courage of decent people to guard against their abuse. That these institutions can help us become more human is obvious; that is why they were created, and why we are building them now. But if they are to guarantee anything to us, it is we, first of all, who must guarantee them.

In the somewhat chaotic provisional activity around the technical aspects of building the state, it will do us no harm occasionally to remind ourselves of the meaning of the state, which is, and must remain, truly human — which means it must be intellectual, spiritual, and moral.

HOW ARE we to go about building such a state? What does such an ambition bind us to or offer us, in practical terms?

There is no simple set of instructions on how to proceed. A moral and intellectual state cannot be established through a constitution, or through law, or through directives, but only through complex, long-term, and never-ending work involving education and self-education. What is needed is lively and responsible consideration of every political step, every decision; a constant stress on moral deliberation and moral judgement; continued self-examination and self-analysis; an endless rethinking of our priorities. It is not, in short, something we can simply declare or introduce. It is a way of going about things, and it demands the courage to breathe moral and spiritual motivation into everything, to seek the human dimension in all things. Science, technology, expertise, and so-called professionalism are not enough. Something more is necessary. For the sake of simplicity, it might be called spirit. Or feeling. Or conscience.