

Open Society: Its Old Enemies and Its New Friends

WRR-Lecture 23 november 2017

Introduction by Corien Prins

Prof. Ignatieff,

Dear participants in today's program, ambassadors, former members of the WRR and colleagues,

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to today's WRR Lecture, which has been given the theme of *The Open Society: Old Enemies and New Friends*. I am very pleased to see you all here. Of course, I am pleased to be able to announce our prominent guest today: Michael Ignatieff, as well as other distinguished speakers who will reflect on today's theme. But I am also pleased that you have all come because today's theme is an urgent and crucial one. It requires us all not only to think and reflect but also to act and take responsibility. In other words, today's theme requires us, the audience, to be more than just spectators and listeners. We are actors as well, in making up today's audience and in taking responsibility tomorrow.

Ladies and Gentlemen. I say nothing new when I tell you that we are living in a time of complex and profound changes: we are facing an ever-expanding globalization, the ongoing influx of immigrants into Western societies and the opportunities and risks inherent in a digitally connected world. Democratic values are at stake, moreover, in countries that are part of the European Union.

These and other changes clearly have an effect on the core values that underlie what has been described by Karl Popper as Open Societies. In his 1945 book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper contrasted open societies with closed ones. Closed societies do not allow people to have voice and they have closed borders, in various interpretations of the word "border." Open societies, in contrast, encourage rational reflection and give individuals the freedom and responsibility to think for themselves. They are based, above all, on democracy, equality and faith in reason.

In his Lecture today, Michael Ignatieff will take us to the many dilemmas that we are facing in our present-day world to uphold the core values that underlie an open society. Inspired, I am sure, by his observations, today's columnist Haroon Sheikh and panel members Lilian Concalves, Marcia Luyten and Vinod Subramaniam will reflect on the role of the media, academia and civil society in maintaining openness and democracy. Ernst Hirsch Ballin, WRR council member, finally, will bring together the insights that we have gained and relate these to the WRR itself.

In contrast to earlier years, the panel will not be moderated by a member of the WRR. Given the theme of today's lecture, we find it particularly crucial that all generations participate in a discussion of the open society. We have invited all Dutch universities to name one student to act as moderator of the panel, and we are highly pleased to have Lydia Vlagsma, student at Radboud University Nijmegen, in our midst to moderate the discussion.

Ladies and Gentlemen. It is no longer an option to turn a blind eye to the many changes we are facing in today's society or simply to close our minds to them. Friends and Enemies of the open society are amongst us, even here in the Netherlands. This very week, with the Black Pete controversy, is a case in point. Our traditional Dutch celebration of Sinterklaas and in particular the character of Black Pete testifies to the collision between open and closed societies, a collision between those who value the traditions that come with this children's festivity and its origins, history and practices, and those who claim that Black Pete is racist. An open society allows for a debate between these two perspectives; a closed society is a society where people erect road blocks (as people did last weekend in the north of our country), preventing other people from freely articulating their perspective in the debate. As a closed society is a society in which the state does not act upon a violation of the right to demonstrate, this example serves to illustrate how the virtues of an open society are under attack.

It is not difficult to point to other clashes at close hand, for example those caused by the advent of new phenomena, whether they be the arrival of immigrants or the new communication opportunities offered by digital tools. In sum, we can no longer downplay the significance of these phenomena. We need friends, perhaps new friends, to uphold the core values of the open society. And we need to re-examine the roles and responsibilities of various actors, such as the media, academia, civil society and the state. Ladies and gentlemen, I do hope we will be offering you an inspiring afternoon for further reflection on these complex challenges and food for thought for each and every one of us in taking up these challenges in the weeks, months and – I am sure – years ahead.

Before giving the floor to our keynote speaker, Michael Ignatieff, I would like to invite you to play a small role in our program. Given the size of today's audience, it is impossible to have all of you participate in the discussion. Nevertheless, new media provide us with a tool that will allow you to be more involved as an audience. And so I have two questions I would like you to answer by means of your smart phones.

First, I have introduced those who will be on stage today. But I would like you to introduce yourself as well. I just concluded that various actors will have to play their role in safeguarding the open society. The first question to you, therefore, is: what is your position, or what kind of actor are you yourself?

The second question relates to the many virtues that are the cornerstone of the open society. I referred to core values such as the freedom and responsibility of individuals to think for themselves, democracy, equality and faith in reason. My second question, therefore, is: what is the very first word you would connect with the open society? The words you provide us with will make up a word cloud. At the end of the program, we will repeat these two questions to see if our word cloud has changed and in what respects.

So now it is time for our lecturer to take to the floor. Professor Ignatieff, may I invite you please to come on stage.