

**‘STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONS AND POLITICAL
PARTIES: A CHALLENGE FOR POLITICIANS AND THE
PUBLIC’**

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*Genetics determines what you are made of;
politics determines what you will become.*
Stanislaw J Lec

As you will have gathered from the quotation I have chosen as a heading for this paper, I am proposing that political activity be seen as the most appropriate tool with which we can change society and try to deal successfully with the problems and flaws of institutions and the democratic system.

The very fact that we, as European and Latin American parliamentarians and political leaders meeting in a forum such as this, feel the need to reclaim politics shows us how very relevant all the comments made about a lack of leadership among politicians are today. I would like to discuss with you the public's disaffection with the party political system and with the members of the parties involved, as well as the storm clouds gathering over the noble activity that is politics. I will also comment on what I think are the main causes of this long-running situation. However, I must warn you that I am an optimist, and so despite the in-depth introspective I am about to indulge in, I hope that by the end of this discussion we shall be seeing more light than shadow and that together we will have sketched out a hopeful vision of the future.

I am also a practical person. As a left-wing woman, born during Franco's regime – I am 53 years old – I had no choice but to be optimistic and practical. Under Franco, I lived the first half of my life without freedom. The second half

of my life has been spent defending freedom in the Basque country against the terrorist organisation ETA, which has murdered 1000 people since the arrival of democracy. I have also endured the actions of a nationalist government which, more often than not, is more concerned about consolidating its power than about defending the freedom and security of thousands of Basques who are persecuted and threatened by the terrorists because they refuse to kowtow to the terrorists' totalitarian aspirations.

Despite this – perhaps precisely because of it – I am still involved in politics. This is not solely or primarily because I feel it is my vocation, but because I know from experience that only via politics can we change the things in the world that pose the greatest risks to development and human dignity.

There are at least two ways of addressing the critical situation facing democratic institutions and politics. One would be to adapt to it and obtain as much personal gain as possible, avoiding, as far as we can, the effects that the worst problems have on us. The other would be to turn to political action as a catalyst for change and begin working towards institutional reforms to establish the necessary basis so that, rather than ignoring or putting up with the decisions taken by politicians, most of the citizens affected can accept them as positive steps.

As humans we cannot change the laws of nature, but we can change the legislation we use to organise our institutions and govern the way we live together. What man has done, man can change. The options – both political – are to adapt or to act. If I may use such an expression - and it is not my intention in this case to bring ideology into the equation - the first would be a conservative option, in favour of consolidating that which is already established. Without overestimating our ability to make radical changes to the established situation, choosing the second option would be a way of saying that we do not accept that social inequalities and injustices in our world are inevitable, as if they were natural phenomena. It means we believe that

engaging in politics can help us reduce the importance of those aspects of our lives and personal development that are predetermined by genetics, tradition, race, gender or social context.

In his book *El valor de elegir* ('The value of choice'), the philosopher Fernando Savater maintains that to engage in politics is *'to choose to broaden the consensus on social institutions as much as possible and to recognise that we live in two worlds: the world of natural necessity and the world of political freedom. In the first we are merely subject to legislation, but in the second we can actually get involved, becoming legislators ourselves.'*

I wholeheartedly believe in this statement. That is why, from my perspective as a practical woman, I recommend political action. Politics is the most useful tool in democracy; the only tool capable of defending the public; a tool that allows us to negotiate in the name of democracy with authorities that are governing the world and which are subject to minimal democratic scrutiny. So I am reclaiming a status for politics not only from an ethical or moral perspective, but also, to use a politically incorrect expression, from a utilitarian perspective.

As the world becomes more complex, the need for politics becomes more evident. I realise that the public does not see it this way, but with increased globalisation and more decisions being taken at world level, it is patently clear that it is increasingly necessary to shore up the democratic instruments that allow us to protect individual rights and common interests.

In my opinion it is not possible to reclaim Politics with a capital P without doing the same with respect to politicians and the role of political parties. At the end of the day, both here and abroad, it is the political parties that draw up the electoral lists and nominate the candidates. Politicians – the men and women forming parliaments and governments – are the ones taking the decisions that affect society as a whole.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Hannah Arendt, the German thinker and great defender and critic of politics said that the essence of man lies in his ability to work miracles and to initiate the improbable and unattainable, and that this is commonly known as 'action'. She believed that an individual is never free in isolation, but that he or she is free if they act within the realm of the polis. It would be hard to find a better way of expressing the relationships between politics and freedom, and politics and democracy.

I am aware that, at the moment, this discussion on reclaiming politics is not a popular one, even among ourselves as politicians. I am sure that you, like me, have colleagues who are always apologising for engaging in politics. When somebody asks them what they do, they reply: 'I'm a nurse, I'm an architect, I'm a lawyer, I'm a doctor, I'm an electrician, but at the moment I'm in Parliament or on the council'. They believe – quite rightly – that politics has no kudos. The worrying thing is that they do not seem willing to do anything about the causes of this situation.

I know one should not make generalisations when it comes to experience, let alone when it comes to suggesting ways forward. It is my view that for Spaniards of my generation, engaging in politics is a rather adventurous thing to do. Things are quite different for those who were born into democracy or who have always lived in countries where the word 'politics' has immediately brought to mind attitudes, actions or privileges that are not particularly edifying from an ethical, moral or purely democratic point of view. As a teenager, when I began to take an interest in the world around me, engaging in politics, to put it simply, meant living in a democracy. Engaging in politics meant not being afraid to discuss ideas, have different opinions, and to talk freely, outside our own homes, about the issues of concern to us; the kinds of issues that my elder brothers and sisters and I discussed at great length with our father. Engaging in politics meant being able to vote, being able to choose who represented us, being like the other democratic countries in the world. To

me, being able to engage in politics and living in a democracy were always one and the same thing.

My father was a socialist, one of the old school who had defended the Spanish Republic and been on the losing side in the war. He taught us to respect rules and laws. He taught us to remember and to look to the future. And he taught us to work so that neither we, nor our children, would ever have to go through what they had suffered. He would not have wanted to have won the war by turning the clock back. That is why he taught us the value of democracy and the value of politics. He taught us how important it is to be able to choose, and what an honour it was to be elected, to stick to agreements and to keep to one's word. He also taught us about the responsibilities involved in both decisions. That is why I am still very proud to be a politician, to represent citizens, and to be able to be their intermediary.

However, my vocation, my sheer enthusiasm for politics, does not mean I am unaware of the public's indifference towards politics and politicians, and of the risks to the democratic system if we are unable to react to that. That is why I shall also be mentioning the things we as politicians have done wrong and which, to a certain extent, explain the detachment on the part of the public. Forgive me for bringing party politics into the discussion. I know it is possible to get involved in politics without belonging to a political party. In fact, I know many people – many of my closest friends – who are actively involved in non-governmental development cooperation organisations; who are members of pacifist, environmental or feminist associations; write political articles; belong to anti-globalisation movements; demonstrate against war, the death penalty, the impunity of war criminals and those responsible for genocide, and so on. I believe that all these activities are also highly commendable examples of political activity.

However, it is precisely on the basis of respect for these personal and life choices that I would like to stand up for the importance of political parties and

the need to restructure them to fit into this new society, thus making them truly useful. If we believe in the need for politics and are aware of the pivotal role of political parties in selecting and nominating the leaders and members of democratic institutions, my colleague's suggestion of changing the institutions, relaunching them, would also mean acting beforehand to relaunch political parties.

1.- Changing political parties

In my view, to form strong political institutions we need strong political parties. I also believe that, beyond the structural, historical or cultural differences between parties from across the political spectrum both in Europe and Latin America, the analysis I am about to make generally applies across the board. With the appropriate adjustments, it could cover almost all of them. In my opinion – and this has already been made clear during this conference – there is an urgent need for major changes to be made to the ways in which political parties operate. They are still locked into the old structures that were set up to deal with last century's problems. Parties have an unsatisfactory record – and have sometimes proven to be pretty irrelevant – when it comes to tackling the challenges involved in modern society and the age of globalisation. Over the last 20 years, major structural and social changes have taken place in the world.

Today, political parties and trade unions are no longer the building blocks of society, although they remain essential for forming political institutions. They now coexist with organisations of all sizes and persuasions, some of which act to defend the interests of society as a whole, and do not restrict their actions to one specific sector. This could apply to the environmental and feminist movements, for example.

This wide range of representative structures in society reflects the changes that have occurred in our society such as increased mobility, access to information,

new technologies, the participation of women in the labour market, major shifts in the birth rate and life expectancy, immigration, etc. At the same time, as a result of all these factors, new concerns are coming to light. There are new values to defend: sustainable development; gender equality; access to education; ecology; solidarity; child protection; equality with regard to civil rights issues linked to sexuality or religion; the protection of minorities, their languages and cultures; etc. Today, the public has more information, it is better informed, and it has higher expectations. Twenty-first century citizens are more critical about democracy, and are even more critical of political parties, despite their continued belief that parties are a key part of the democratic process. On the other hand, perhaps that is precisely why they are critical.

Faced with a new situation – characterised by a more complex society that is organised in a completely different manner than it was only 20 years ago – political parties are going through a crisis and are beginning to pay the price for failing to adapt while everything around them was changing. They are no longer the only channels through which citizens can get involved, and they can sense that the public is not particularly enamoured with them. Today's citizens want political parties that are more down-to-earth, more open and more transparent. The fact that political parties have failed to respond positively to this is one of the main causes of the disaffection that we have come here to discuss.

The disaffection the public feels for political parties adversely affects the democratic system. It is a serious situation that has already distanced the public from political institutions and politics in general, to such an extent that there is now an impression – which I think is mistaken – that institutions are not concerned about people's problems and are not addressing them.

There is a feeling that the institutions are closed, distant and fairly irrelevant. This feeling is largely based on the public's perception that party decisions –

bearing in mind that the parties draw up the electoral lists and, through these lists, select the people who will take up public office – are taken with a view to sharing out powers internally. Parties are often accused of having a lack of internal democracy, allowing party management posts to take precedence over elected ones, and for allowing the party structures to grow apart from the voters. Sometimes politicians are seen to be leaders competing for government or parliamentary office, rather than a group brought together to serve the public. If nothing were to be done about this, it would be possible to come to the dramatic – but erroneous – conclusion that democracy and elections serve principally to allow certain people to tighten their personal grip on the leadership or membership of a party or institution, instead of striving for social change, which is the real objective of political activity.

Political parties, and we as politicians, are responsible for the emergence of this opinion. So, of course, are those who scorn politics and representative democracy because they have always exercised their power without recourse to them. But let us look at what we, as responsible politicians, can do. One of the problems lies in the fact that there are people – more ‘politics professionals’ than ‘professional politicians’ – for whom a career in politics is more of a job than a vocation, and whose sole aim is to remain in politics at any cost, even going as far as dismissing poor election results – that in any company would lead to the resignation of the person responsible – in order to maintain internal stability. That stability is then turned into a permanent situation via cross-party deals that, sometimes, can almost be more coveted than an election victory. I am sure you can all think of more than one example of this. This kind of ‘cartelisation’ and the integration of political parties into the State is something that could seriously hamper parties’ ability to provide an effective means of communication with civil society.

In countries like my own, where politics has always had negative connotations – doubtless a remnant of the dictatorship – the image of political parties as closed shops was accepted for a while, when parties were considered vital for

political reform and stability. We could mention many examples of similar developments in Latin America. Today, however, with democracy established and where there is a need to encourage people to act to protect it, transparency and the different kinds of involvement in party politics are vital aspects as far as the public is concerned. That is why I believe we urgently need to address the disaffection with democracy that is focused on political parties, but also has an effect on public institutions.

The political parties also see this situation as being critical. One of the reactions we have already witnessed is that of the traditional parties protecting themselves against competition from the other forms of political engagement and representation for different interest groups that we spoke of earlier. This is a big mistake. If the traditional parties cut themselves off and protect themselves, the public will become even more disaffected and abstentions will rise. Or worse, as has already been the case, we will see the rise of fringe, anti-system parties, examples of which are hardly lacking in Europe or in Latin America.

If parties have to be reformed because politics has to be reformed, and politics has to be reformed to bring it closer to the citizens, the only thing political parties can do is open up their structures and agree to effect change instead of resisting it or allowing it to sweep them aside. They must be willing to take the risk. And opening up is the risk we must take. The political parties we belong to are being called upon to change if we want to bring politics closer to the citizens. I believe this is the right thing to do. It is true that major change can cause short-term stability problems within parties. But is it possible, for example, to make a realistic drive to increase the membership of a party without granting all party members at least the same rights they have as citizens when it comes to selecting and nominating people to fill party management or political posts? We should extend the foundations of political parties and increase their involvement in society, thus making parties into stronger social structures. But this will be impossible unless we give members,

supporters and voters more opportunities to influence and take part in internal party affairs. Some say it is risky to put parties' inner workings on display. But it is a calculated risk: transparency and involvement are vital if we want to restore the prestige of political parties so that through them we can help shore up the institutions. If political parties stagnate, society rebels and rejects us. And that is bad for democracy.

To quote Bob Dylan's beautiful protest song, the times they are a-changin'. But times are changing because human beings are changing. In her autobiography, Indira Ghandi wrote that when she was born, the advisers to Nehru, her father, recommended that he father a son as soon as possible in order to name him as his heir. Nehru replied that nothing in the world could ever change if we ourselves were not able to change. By this Indira Ghandi wanted to show that she herself was a living example of a bid for change. And that is exactly what I am calling for: we have to make a bid for change; we must change the way political parties are structured; we must change our mentality; we must adapt to our new society. And this stems from my burning conviction that only through strong political parties will we establish strong political institutions that are able to deal effectively with new problems, respond to new aspirations and resolve or alleviate the effects of new tragedies occurring in the world.

2. Changing politics

The feeling of detachment from politics is also related to politicians' inability to explain not only the 'what' but also, and above all, the 'WHY'. In the second part of this paper, I should like to discuss the need to change the words we use and the ways in which we express our commitments. Such changes will help us ensure that democratic institutions and political parties can once again be perceived as useful aspects of society. They will also put people's worries and concerns on our agenda.

Several years ago at a meeting of the Socialist International in Paris, I heard Shimon Peres say that the best thing about today's media-focused world is that television has rendered warmongering and dictatorships unacceptable. Although, unfortunately, this statement may not always hold absolutely true, it is the case that, as a result of new communications technology, every day millions of people are shocked by images of systematic breaches of human rights, the torture of prisoners, living conditions in refugee camps, etc., that are brought to us almost as they happen. Millions of people are objecting to the world's inability to act in the face of natural disasters or massive migrations of hundreds of thousands of people leaving their countries because of shortages of food or water (a recent UN study puts the figure at 20 million per year). Every day, millions of people are showing us that they are prepared to take action by standing up for gender equality, protesting against unjust, illegal wars and defending freedom.

Thanks to television, the world's dramas are unfolding before our very eyes. However, the many people who have been reacting to tragedy and injustice tend to complain that the responses they are receiving from the authorities are unsatisfactory and inconsistent. They ask us what we are doing to put an end to a situation in which 1.5 billion people live on a dollar a day, or in which 3 billion people live on just under 3 dollars a day. They ask us what we are doing to rectify a situation in which more than 300 million children are being exploited in different ways all over the world. They ask us what we are doing to combat the scourge of Aids, with which ten more people in Africa are infected every day. What is the political response to a situation in which it is clear that barriers relating to economics, trade, financial services etc. are tumbling down, and, at the same time, obstacles are being put in place to stop people moving around, forcing them to stay where they are even though they are dying of hunger, thirst or disease?

People want to see more conclusive action and discussion from the political sphere on all areas of grave concern to society. Sometimes people tell us that

only non-political bodies and NGOs seem to be giving them the answers they seek. However, I am sure you will agree that in order to tackle these issues seriously and suggest solutions, we need a strategy that transcends national borders and is not sector-specific. We need to coordinate action and political strategy.

Neither all the NGOs in the world, nor any one country, however important, can successfully tackle endemic famine in Africa; the incessant desertification threatening our planet; the ever-increasing disparities between countries in the First and Third Worlds; terrorism; or the criminal organisations that carry out people-trafficking. Only if the governments of the world draw up a coordinated strategy and decide to invest in education, training and new technologies in the Third World will we be able to avert tragedy and close the ever-widening gap between the developed countries and those that, according to a Haitian friend of mine, are ‘under-developing’.

I know this is hardly an original argument, but this review of the current situation confirms that only via international institutions that are more political and more committed than the present ones; only with a political consensus that stretches across the ‘civilised world’, will we be able to take the decisions needed to save humanity from disasters or, when that is impossible, to heal the wounds. NGOs have an absolutely vital role to play: they not only react to situations, they are at the very forefront and can act to motivate the authorities. However, we all know that a sticking plaster solution is not enough. That is why I believe that if – in addition to spearheading a solution to the problems – politics wants to win back both prestige and the support of the people, we must make the commitments necessary to address all of these issues.

And so we return to the issue I mentioned at the beginning of this paper: the need to strengthen and relaunch our institutions. There are so many conflicts happening around the world, and yet practically no solutions are being

suggested for any of them. This is due to the dearth of strong institutions. Some of the most striking examples of our failure include the situation in the Middle East; the cultivation of drugs as the only economic alternative in certain countries not so very far away; refugee camps in which, like those in the Sahara, several generations have come into the world; the continued use of the death penalty in many countries, some of which are our political and economic partners; and systematic breaches of human rights and persecution on the grounds of race, gender or religion.

Because of this, I believe we need to encourage the most dynamic sectors of our society to get involved, and to set a new political agenda that fits in with that of the people. We need their input to make progress with regard to strengthening our democratic institutions. Without it, such progress will be impossible.

For this to happen, we also need to recover our pride in politics. We need the people to trust in us once again, and we need this to make us stronger. I know it is possible to encourage the young people who are bored with politicians and their discussions, and who do not understand the *raison d'être* of politics, to get involved in politics again. I believe things would improve if we were able to explain to them that we will only be able to earn respect and ensure that other major powers – including the US, China and India – respect human rights, pay off debts with the UN, or suspend or abolish the death penalty if Europe has stronger, more representative shared institutions, a common foreign and security policy and its own voice to represent us throughout the world. I believe we would garner a lot of support if we were able to explain that only if Latin America pulls together as a political whole will it be able to gain the international cooperation it needs to address the serious problems it faces.

Of course, in order for this to happen we must be able to send out a credible, ambitious message. The public must realise that we are not resigned to living in an increasingly unfair world. They must realise that we believe solutions can be found and that donating 0.7 per cent of our budget to development

cooperation organisations is not enough to ease our consciences. They must realise that we have ambitious, wide-reaching, brave yet consistent and attainable proposals to make with regard to the other 99.3 per cent.

Some of the facts I have referred to during this paper relating to disasters and events occurring in the world are not only morally repugnant to us, they are also determining factors with regard to our security and international peace. If we stopped being politically active and hoped that if disasters occurred we would be left unscathed, we would be making a mistake. Today, there are no borders or umbrellas that can protect us from disaster. A good example of this lies in the cruelty of attacks by terrorists who have demonstrated their ability to strike anywhere in the world.

But we should not let this get us down. History is full of examples that remind us that many of the changes humans have experienced happened because there was no other choice but to embark on change. That fact – over and above my belief in the ability of human beings to change the course of events – inspires me to be optimistic about the future. Under these circumstances even the most reticent – the most ‘conservative’ – people recognise we must face up to a challenge we cannot put off any longer. I have come full circle. The world needs politics, but as politicians we must renew our arguments, broaden our commitment and change our priorities if we want to engage with the citizens. Without their cooperation and involvement, we will not be able to do anything.

I do not mind admitting that, for me, there are ideological issues at stake here that fit in with my democratic commitment. As I said earlier, I support political activity as a choice and as a necessity. I cannot stand the half-heartedness of the path followed by those who never dare do anything. The late Ramón Rubial, President of the PSOE (the Spanish Socialist Party) was once talking to a journalist who thought the PSOE had been boasting that it had lost the distinguishing marks of the left. He told the journalist in reply that the only useful kind of revolution in a democracy is one that can be written in the

statute book. Of course, to write in the statute book, you have to win an election. And to do that we need the public's involvement and the public's vote.

To conclude, allow me to quote from the same book by Fernando Savater, the philosopher I mentioned before: *'If, today, we had to sum up in one word the political project most worthy of our attention, I would choose the word 'citizenship'. That is, a form of participatory social integration based on shared equal rights, rather than a sense of belonging to specific groups bound by lineage, cultural traditions, economic or inherited social status. If something needs globalising, it is the recognition, by humans, of that which is human. Choosing politics is a personal step forward that can be taken by anyone who does not let their apparent insignificance stop them seeking out companions and like-minded individuals in order to achieve as much as possible in the face of seemingly hopeless situations'*.