Idealism and Realism in Politics

Master lecture upon receiving the Doctor Honoris Causa decoration at the University of Concepción. Concepción, January 14, 1994

Ladies and gentlemen:

It is a great honor for me the distinction with which the University of Concepción honors me. I receive it with profound recognition and gratitude. I express my deepest thanks to the Rector, for his very generous words.

This University, which next March celebrates 75 years of operation, has earned its well-deserved prestige as the oldest and main center of higher education in the country based outside the capital. Undoubtedly, it has not only been an important center of professional training for the youth of the central and southern provinces of the country—the only one for many years—but [that] it has also contributed powerfully to cultivating the traditional self-esteem of the *Penquista* society, elevating its cultural level, and developing the regionalist conscience of the Biobío area.

I believe it is only fair to pay tribute, on this occasion, to the inspirer, great architect of its creation and, for several decades, Rector of this University, Mr. Enrique Molina Garmendia, whom—I think it appropriate to confess here—I have admired since my youth.

He was a great humanist who, in times of rationalist scientism, proclaimed and defended the significance of spiritual values in human life. He knew how to reconcile his intellectual vocation with his capacity for action, expressed in his administration as rector of the high schools of Talca and Concepción, and in the creation of this University.

He was one of those men who contributed to the creation of the great Chilean middle class, [and] who from the end of the last century [the 19th] until the first half of the present distinguished themselves by their desire to improve, their intellectual capacity, their moral integrity, and their spirit of public service, virtues that made them the architects of a new stage in the history of Chile and [the] promoters of its democratization process. Having fulfilled this pleasant duty, I will enter into the subject of my speech.

Idealism and realism

The reflections that I will now develop on this subject are the fruit, mainly, of my own experience, much more than of erudite readings.

I believe that the best way to reciprocate the high honor that the University of Concepción confers on me, is not by trying to make a presentation as a professor versed in philosophy, sociology, and political law—which I am not, although I know something about the latter—but through a personal testimony of what I have lived in more than half a century of political activity.

It is worth mentioning that, when speaking of "idealism" and "realism" in this presentation, we will not refer to the metaphysical meanings that these concepts have in philosophy, but to a more common meaning, relative to the position or attitude of people in relation to ideals.

Following Ferrater Mora, "we call 'idealist' any doctrine —and sometimes simply any attitude— according to which the most fundamental thing, and that by which human actions are supposed to be guided, are ideals —achievable or not, but almost always imagined as achievable—". Understood in this way, "idealism is contrasted with realism, the latter understood as the doctrine—and sometimes simply the attitude—according to which the most fundamental thing, and that by which human actions are supposed to be guided, are 'realities'—the 'harsh realities', the 'cold, hard facts'. This sense of idealism is usually ethical or political, or both at the same time. It can also be considered simply 'human', insofar as what is taken into account is the action of man and, especially, the action of man in society". So far Ferrater Mora.

Idealism entails confidence and faith in man, in his capacity for perfection and for good; it believes in ethical values as the guiding motives of human conduct; it urges to fight for noble causes linked to the progress of people and societies; it feeds dreams of a better world and invites to do what is possible—even at the cost of sacrifices—to turn them into reality.

Realism sticks to the facts. Based on experience, it notes that the human being is a limited and weak creature, capable of virtues and sins, of greatness and misery. It does not reject great dreams, but neither does it let itself be tempted by them. It appreciates difficulties and limitations, examines probabilities, and does not risk itself on causes it judges impossible.

Idealism is optimistic; realism is skeptical.

Idealism and realism coexist in the existence of societies and people, as reflected in Cervantes' great novel, a mirror of human life. Don Quixote is an idealist; Sancho Panza, a realist.
In politics, an important part of human activity, idealism and realism also coexist, perhaps more than in any other.

Politics

Politics deals with the government of nations, a matter that by its nature interests everyone—even those who believe or say they do not care—since the quality of people's lives, their employment possibilities, their hopes for a better future, depend—to a greater or lesser extent—on whether there are good or bad governments in their country.

In politics, multiple interests, often divergent, meet and coexist. And although the end of political duty is the common good—on which everyone agrees—it is, by its nature, a competitive and even conflictive activity, because not everyone agrees on what that common good consists of, nor, even less, on the best way to achieve it.

The clash of opposing interests, of diverse ideological conceptions, of different convictions about the hierarchy of the most important values of human coexistence—order, freedom, justice, fraternity—

of different personalities—each with its virtues and defects, its ideals and ambitions, its nobility and its passions—makes politics not only a complex and difficult activity, but also a polemical and confrontational one. If life is a struggle, political life is so to the highest degree.

With the aggravating characteristic that political life is, by its nature, public and not private. Most human activity takes place in the field of what we call "private", because it only interests its actors. This happens with family relations, with the practice of so-called liberal professions, with work within companies.

Some activities, such as social communications, certain artistic shows, and sports competitions, have an increasingly public character. But no activity is as public as politics, since it deals precisely with the collective interest, with what the Romans rightly called the "public thing".

Hence, we politicians are—by the very nature of our activity—the ones most exposed to public judgment and, consequently, to the criticism—adverse or favorable—of everyone.
With the previous concepts clarified, we can enter into the analysis of the place and influence that idealism and realism occupy in political activity.

Prejudices about politics

To do this seriously, we must—in my view—free ourselves from the rather widespread prejudice that politics is an activity at odds with morality or, at least, indifferent to it.

Won over by this belief, many good people shun politics as something sinful, from which nothing good can be expected: a world full of lies, corrupt dealings, disloyalties, and dark passions, where only the ambitious and amoral succeed.

This common idea, which Machiavelli synthesizes in his advice to the Prince "to learn how not to be good", often finds acceptance even in refined minds. Stefan Zweig—in an admirable book—studies the life of Fouché—whom he describes as inconsistent, scheming, treacherous, and amoral—as a "contribution to the typology of the political man".

[José] Ortega y Gasset, for his part, titles "Mirabeau or the Politician" his essay on the famous orator of the Estates-General, whom he describes as "occupied in a bustle of turbulent love affairs, lawsuits, infamous acts, who rolls from prison to prison, from debt to debt, from flight to flight", and whom he qualifies as "archetype of the politician".

Among us, if we stick to what recent public opinion polls express, less than a third of Chileans believe that politicians work thinking about the country's interest; the vast majority supposes that they do so in their personal interest or that of their parties.

The curious thing is that, despite these opinions or contradicting them, in the elections last month more than 91% of registered citizens voted, that is, abstention was less than 9%, and of the votes cast only 5.6% were null or blank, all of which indicates that the concept Chileans have of their politicians must not be so negative, since they trust them by casting their votes for them.

Why and for what purpose is politics done?

Setting prejudices aside, in order to earnestly determine the role that idealism and realism play in political action, we must attempt to answer certain questions that people frequently ask themselves: what motives or driving forces induce individuals to partake in this activity? What objectives or ends do they pursue in doing so? In what manner do the facts or circumstances of reality constrain or divert the attainment of those ends? In other words, why and to what end does one engage in politics? Upon what do the results of such action depend, and to what extent do they correspond with its motives and ends?

My experience leads me to believe that—barring exceptions, as there are in all human endeavors—the vast majority of men and women who commit themselves to political action do so out of noble, generous, and selfless motives.

Love for the homeland, the yearning for freedom, the awareness of having a commitment to society, the thirst for justice or sentiments of social solidarity, and the adherence to moral values whose collective validity is deemed necessary, are the reasons that generally motivate individuals to commit to political action.

They do so, guided by an idealistic zeal to secure independence or foster national development, to forge a society that is more just, fraternal, or compassionate, and to contribute to the common good. They seek, the youth above all, to eradicate or overcome the defects, vices, or limitations of the social order that provoke their rejection, and even their indignation, so as to build a new society free from those evils and more closely aligned with their ideals of goodness, peace, justice, and love.

I believe that history confirms this opinion. Since the times of ancient Greece and Rome, the great statesmen who have taken part in the governance of their peoples have generally done so inspired by noble civic sentiments and in pursuit of the public good.

Especially illustrative is the case of the Liberators of America, the architects of the independence of the republics across our continent.
It might be argued that history also reveals cases of rulers and politicians driven by a lust for power or wealth—fanatical, tyrannical, cruel, and corrupt. This is true; yet I believe that such cases, however prominent they may be, constitute the exception, and even many of them—paradoxical as it may seem—have acted or continue to act motivated by what, in their own conception, constitute objectives of the public good.

However, beyond intentions—for it is said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions—what concerns ordinary mortals is the political endeavor or action itself, and, above all, its results. "By their fruits ye shall know them!"

In what manner does political activity correspond to those motives of the public good that inspire it, and how does it translate into achievements that are consistent with the objectives it pursues?

The limitations of reality

Here is where the limitations imposed by reality come into play: the reality of individuals and of facts, both subjective and objective.

1. *Subjective limitations: the matter of power*

In the first place, politics—like all earthly endeavors—suffers from the imperfection inherent to human nature.

The man, being a frail, bounded, and sinful creature, frequently finds himself, much like Saint Paul, failing to do the good he desires and doing the evil he does not wish to do. This occurs in all spheres of human life; quite obviously, politics is not, nor is there any reason for it to be, an exception.

The politician's aptitude for the execution of his duties, his intelligence, his knowledge, his vocation for service, his vital commitment to the values, principles, or ideals he proclaims, his temperament, and his disposition for engaging with others, are circumstances that decisively influence the outcomes of his actions.

To these personal factors is added a most significant one in the case of politicians: what we might term their susceptibility to power. Power is not a phenomenon exclusive to politics; it also manifests in other domains: within the bosom of enterprises, social organizations, the judiciary, the armed forces, and the very churches themselves.

But in none does it bear such paramount significance as in the exercise of public duties tied to the governance of the State.

The politician's task is, precisely, to attend to governance, and when he assumes offices that entail direct intervention in that function—whether at the national, regional, provincial, or communal level—be it by popular election or by appointment, he comes to partake, to a greater or lesser degree, in the wielding of public power. And this, in a certain manner, imprints character, influencing the life and personality of those who find themselves in such a situation.

Power, whether one desires it or not, bestows privileges. Whosoever exercises authority is granted special titles: "Your Honor," "Honorable," "Most Illustrious," "Your Excellency".

In public ceremonies, he occupies the foremost seats. He commands special goods and services: an automobile, a chauffeur, personal security, and escorts. All of this flatters self-esteem and awakens vanity.

Whosoever exercises authority may, in some fashion—and even without stepping outside the bounds of the law—favor his friends, pass over those who are not, and even bring harm upon his enemies, should he have any.

He who retains power becomes the object of special attentions—invitations, gifts—not solely [on the]

part of his friends, but from many who seek to curry favor with him.

And should he lack a reputation for absolute integrity, there will be no shortage of those who might insinuate to him, in the most innocent of ways, the possibility of some undertaking, transaction, or business venture—perfectly lawful, or perhaps less so—that might directly or indirectly yield him a benefit.

All of these circumstances can gradually engender in the politician, should he lack personal modesty and fortitude of character, an acclimation that leads him to forget or set aside his grand ideals, or that erodes the purity of his convictions.

Lord Acton has already proclaimed: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely". Hence the necessity, which Montesquieu so wisely pointed out, for power to be distributed across distinct bodies, so that "power must check power".

In modern democratic States, the separation of public powers, the regulation of administrative procedures, and the mechanisms of oversight and the public disclosure of public administration, with the subsequent monitoring by the media and public opinion, serve to curb the abuses of power and defend nations against corruption, unless—naturally—these are vices explicitly or implicitly tolerated by society as a whole.

The gravest peril that power entails is that it may become the sole purpose of politics. Such is the conception of Machiavelli, who counsels the Prince to employ any manner of means, even the most perverse and criminal, in order to seize power, preserve it, and expand it.

From the moment this is accepted, ideals are forsaken, principles are sacrificed, and politics is transformed into a mere struggle for power.

This represents the perversion of politics, whose [original] aim is the common good of the nation, an achievement for which power is nothing more than an instrument.

It is undoubtedly true that in the realm of politics what counts is success, and this is measured by the possession of power. Triumphs, in politics, consist in attaining power and retaining it. What do I gain by serving the people, if I forfeit power? But of what use is power to me, if not to serve the people?

Politics and morality

To resolve this antinomy, we must remember that politics, like all human activity, is governed by morality, which concerns itself precisely with human acts in terms of the good or evil they entail. And we must also remember that the life of nations transcends that of men, and possesses a temporal dimension that compels us to judge facts, and the good or bad within them, from their historical perspective.

Is the ruler who leads his people to ruin, yet maintains himself in power by force, successful? Or is the one who improves the living conditions of his people, even if he loses power? Is the politician whose

leadership divides his people and plunges them into hatred and violence successful, provided he manages to retain power? Or is it he who prefers to yield to an adversary in exchange for saving the unity of his people and achieving social peace?

For my part, I believe that a government is truly successful when its policy and accomplishments satisfy the fundamental aspirations of the people, allow [it] to live in peace, justice, liberty, and well-being, and signify independence, progress, and prestige for its homeland.

That is what is truly important for the country, and not who [holds or] wields control of the government. Because neither does success consist in power, nor is power the ultimate goal of politics, but merely a means to attain the common good, the true objective of all good politics.

2. *Objective limitations*

Aside from the aforementioned circumstances, which limit or condition political duty through factors relating to the persons partaking in it, there are other limitations deriving from purely objective factors, which form part of the reality in which political action is embedded.

As in all human conduct, for an idea to become a fact within political activity, an intelligent effort is required, and many obstacles must be overcome.

It costs little to formulate an attractive political program that fully expresses ideal aspirations. The fulfillment of that program, however great the political will of those promoting its execution may be, will depend upon multiple circumstances beyond their control: the viability of its proposals, its compatibility with other government actions, the availability of financial resources and capable professional and technical teams, and sufficient political support to adopt the corresponding decisions.

The more "idealistic" a project is, the more difficult its realization will be, due to the obstacles it will encounter both in the inertia of existence which resists change and in the interests whose resistance it provokes. The more profound the transformations sought, the greater that resistance will be.

The politics of testimony, very easy from the opposition, is rarely viable for those bearing the responsibility to govern.

The people demand and expect from them concrete actions, effective achievements, that signify the resolution of collective problems, real improvements, and progress. And they also ask of them political stability, citizen security, and civic peace.

In the complexity of modern life, the political, economic, social, and international spheres are usually interconnected, such that the decisions adopted in one of them often have repercussions in the others.

This demands the coordination of actions and the evaluation, with a comprehensive vision, of the resolutions one wishes to take.

In principle, in a democratic system, the majority rules and the minority oversees. Yet this, in practice, is not so simple. There are issues that, by their very nature, call for State policies, requiring broad national support.

Constitutional systems often demand, such as the one in force in Chile, special majorities, higher than a simple one—what is called an absolute majority—to legislate on matters of importance, which can make it necessary to seek agreements between the government and the opposition.

The alternative is to reach an agreement or, simply, to renounce the project that the government deems necessary. In the complex political reality of modern democracies, the all-or-nothing strategy rarely functions; the common good demands concessions.

Opposing interests interplay within society. However resolute the government's will may be to uplift the most neglected sectors, it must evaluate the effects its decisions could yield upon the course of the economy, considering the reaction of those who feel adversely affected.

Furthermore, among a government's goals or objectives there must logically exist an order of priorities, not solely by reason of their importance and urgency, but also due to their interdependence and the manner in which they condition one another.

In the experience of my government, for instance, of the five great tasks we set for ourselves, all coordinated with one another, the fundamental one was undoubtedly to successfully culminate the process of transition to democracy, until achieving the consolidation of a democratic and stable rule of law, devoid of risks of rupture or regression.

This demanded, as an indispensable requisite, achieving within the country a climate of reconciliation and national unity, rising above legitimate discrepancies.

Which, in turn, required averting the exacerbation of conflicts that, reviving the divisions and hatreds of the past, would once again pit Chileans against one another as friends and foes.

These criteria inspired our policy regarding the transcendent and delicate issue of the fundamental human rights violations—especially of the right to life—committed during the past regime.

An essential ethical imperative demanded clarifying the truth of what had occurred before the national and world conscience; this is what the Rettig Commission Report accomplished.

An elemental sense of justice demanded seeking reparations for the victims and their families, which has been done to a significant measure through the law that established the Corporation for Reparation and Reconciliation, and the one that legislated in favor of the political exonerees.

Many demand, furthermore, the punishment of the guilty, a legitimate aspiration yet exceedingly difficult to satisfy, due to the existence of an amnesty law, the time elapsed, and the reactions it stirs within important sectors of the national community.

It has seemed to us that the only path that reconciles the legitimate demand for justice with the aforementioned circumstances has been to leave this matter in the hands of the courts, to which it naturally belongs.

I deeply regret that my initiative to expedite the proceedings, and to facilitate the clarification of the tragedy of our missing compatriots, did not garner the necessary support for its approval.

Analogous criteria have inspired the conduct of my government regarding the so-called "political prisoners": individuals prosecuted for common or terrorist crimes committed as a form of resistance against the dictatorship.

My government proposed legislation that, while retaining the definitive decision in the hands of the courts—where it naturally belongs—would facilitate solutions of justice through the reduction of excessive penalization and the appraisal of the circumstances of each case, as well as the frequently inhumane treatment suffered by the accused.

As the country knows, that law was not approved, and instead, the President of the Republic was empowered to pardon the condemned. Some criticize me severely for the way I have exercised that authority, accusing me of promoting impunity for common and terrorist delinquency. My conscience is entirely clear regarding the manner in which I have proceeded in this matter, studying the background and circumstances of every single case. No one who has committed a crime has gone unpunished; I have limited myself to reducing or commuting the sentence, in accordance with criteria of justice.

Another significant matter, among many, in which my administration had to ensure compatibility of its objectives [with the circumstances] to achieve their viability, was the issue of the so-called "social debt".

It would not have been possible to efficaciously confront the grave deficits with which we received the country in matters of health, education, housing, and also infrastructure, had the Treasury not been provided with greater resources; to obtain them, it was necessary to begin with the tax reform, which, due to the balance of forces in Parliament, was only possible through negotiation.

Much the same can be said of wage improvements, for the achievement of which we fostered agreements between workers and employers that made it possible to balance social betterment with economic stability and development, in accordance with our policy of growth with equity.

These examples, like many others we could cite, demonstrate that any policy, in order to prosper, needs to reconcile the ideals that inspire it, and the goals it pursues, with the circumstances that configure objective reality.

I believe that if my government has been successful—as I trust it has—in the fulfillment of the five great tasks we set for ourselves—democratic consolidation and refinement, national reconciliation, economic growth, social justice, and the international reinsertion of Chile, even if in some of them the progress has not been all that we yearned for—it is because, in their formulation as a program, we

conceived the values and ideals that inspired them alongside an adequate diagnosis of reality; and because, in the endeavor to fulfill them, without ever losing sight of the ends we proposed, we employed the necessary flexibility to circumvent obstacles and unite wills.

What must be done, what is wanted, and what is possible

Summarizing what has been presented, I dare to assert that my now extensive experience has taught me that political action is composed, on the one hand, of the aspirations that move him, of the values in which he believes and which he strives to put into practice, and on the other, of the very reality that constrains him, whether through his own frailties or through objective facts that condition his activity.

Having explained the above, one must ask: what role do ideals play, and what role does reality play in politics?

Without hesitation, I express my conviction that, by their very nature, it is [the] ideals that motivate political action and determine its objectives.

Idealism lies at the beginning and the end of political action. This is not solely what ought to be, by ethical obligation; it is also what generally occurs.

What moves men and women to commit themselves to political life, sacrificing interests and comfort, is their commitment to their ideals.

This is especially true of the youth, whose critical vision of the world they encounter, and their natural yearnings for a better world, lead [them] to desire profound transformations, to envision utopias, and to engage in the action required to make them a reality.

Mere realism, the recognition and acceptance of reality, lacks the indispensable fruitfulness to move human beings to commit to an endeavor as absorbing and demanding as politics.

It might be argued that there are politicians whose sole motivation is power; they enter political activity in pursuit of power. I could not deny this, yet I believe they are in the minority and that, generally, they fail.

Since politics is highly competitive, demands great sacrifices, and never guarantees access to power. Because, being an activity that—at least in a democracy—is always conducted in the public eye and remains subject to general scrutiny and consequent criticism, the politician who does not embody ideals or causes of public good, and who is not consistent with them, soon falls into disrepute and loses credibility in the public mind.

The politician whose primary motivation is power suffers the same fate as a gambler: he almost always loses and generally ends up ruined. Politics conceived as a mere struggle for power is a despicable vice, which degrades those who practice it and inflicts harm upon societies.

The ideals that propel political action generally possess a moral inspiration or content; they respond to values in which one believes.

The yearning for a better, fully human life inspires the diverse political movements or currents, in accordance with the predominant conceptions and historical circumstances of each era.
Freedom, respect for the dignity of persons, equality, justice, solidarity, love for one's neighbor, for the homeland, for humanity, or for nature, along with the human yearnings for order, security, and peace, are values that lie at the foundation of political ideals.

And what role, then, does realism play? I would say that it is an indispensable condition or requisite for the efficacy of political action. Ideals in the abstract are of no use, except for dreaming. Political action seeks to apply them to reality, which fundamentally implies the attempt to improve or perfect it: to change what "is" for what "is owed". And this demands knowing reality and accepting it as a fact, exactly as it is, whether we like it or not.

Merely theoretical political ideals, purposes, or programs are doomed to failure.

The primary condition for their success is their viability. And they shall not be viable if they do not stem from the recognition and acceptance, as a “finding of fact” —to use forensic terminology—of the circumstances that configure the historical reality upon which one intends to act.

Political ideals conceived in the abstract are mere dreams or utopias. And utopias, necessary as they are to take flight, only attain historical efficacy when they manage to be grounded.

"I am I and my circumstance," teaches Ortega y Gasset. And just as one's "circumstance," if it does not outright determine, at the very least limits and conditions the life of every person, so too is it a conditioning factor in the life of nations.

It is not "good politics" if it is incapable of reconciling "idealism" with "realism," which implies acknowledging things as they are: the political, economic, social, and cultural situation of the country in which one intends to act; its geographical and historical circumstances; its institutions and its legal framework; the sentiments, opinions, and aspirations of its people.

One of the elements of this reality is the factor of "time". One cannot do just anything, [if it is] incompatible with reality. And although no reality is immutable, the possibilities of altering it are limited and demand time. Nothing is achieved overnight.

Political action requires determination; what is termed "political will": wanting to do what one yearns for. Yet "wanting" is not enough; it is also necessary to be "able". Wanting what cannot be done is pure voluntarism that leads to failure, to crashing into a wall.

Hence, politics has been defined as "the art of the possible". I believe that to govern is to do what can be done of what is desired, of what is owed.

The first step is to determine "what is owed," that is, the behaviors—actions or omissions—that sound reason points to as necessary or advantageous for attaining the common good, and which correspond to the ideals of freedom, justice, solidarity, peace, or others that are professed.

However, demands of viability or compatibility generally require the establishment of priorities. These determine "what is desired": the political decision to do certain things that need to be done, and to refrain from doing or postpone the execution of others.

Ultimately, not everything that is desired is viable: circumstances frequently prevent us from doing what we want. Upon them depends "what is possible".

In political life, as in personal life, reality limits our conduct. Often, we find that none of the possibilities adequately correspond to what we desire, and circumstances compel us to choose among alternatives that do not satisfy us. Then, the just, correct, and courageous course is not to attempt the ideal yet impossible solution at all costs, nor to surrender, but rather to choose the greatest possible good, or, failing that, the lesser evil.

It is in these instances that the virtue of prudence becomes necessary. The politician, in order to be consistent, must possess courage, bravery, and audacity to fight for what he believes.
But he must also possess prudence so as not to embark upon adventures or paths that lead to failures, disasters, or greater evils.

This is what is demanded of him by his elementary duty to always be responsible. Responsible, before his people and before history, for the good and the evil caused by his decisions and actions.
Thus are idealism and realism combined in politics.

Thank you very much.