



Leadership

An Address to the Hong Kong Union for Young Leaders
26th November 2005

It is possible that someone here today was born on 25th January 1988. If not, I guess that means that no-one here was born on the day that was declared to be the ‘most significant moment for the entire nation of Romania’ – at least, according to the Romanian newspapers of the day. Romania may be a small backward country in eastern Europe, but according to the country’s newspaper, the whole nation rejoiced because 25th January 1988 was the day that (quote) ‘the great hero among the heroes of the nation, the architect of modern socialist Romania, has turned 70’. It seems as though Romanians, or maybe just the reporters for the newspaper, got very excited about the birthday of the country’s Communist Party leader, Nicolae Ceausescu.

Actually, the word ‘leader’ is too weak a word when we talk about Ceausescu. I want to share some ideas about leadership with you this morning, and Ceausescu is an interesting person to begin with. On his 70th birthday, Ceausescu awarded himself several new honours, including, for the fourth time, Hero of the Socialist Republic of Romania, which was an award that only he and his wife held. And if that was not enough, the Party journal *Lumea* published an imaginary birthday message from Queen Elizabeth II praising Ceausescu’s “widely recognised excellence, experience and influence” – as it turned out the quote was taken from a toast offered to him in London almost ten years earlier.

What kind of ego could drive the leader of a small, backward Eastern European country to develop such a personality cult? Before the fall of Communism in Europe, Romania was by far the most repressive and secret country in the Soviet bloc, and it was a very strange place. Consider just two incidents.

In 1978 there was an incident known as the ‘hole that was not a hole’. A new underground station was being built in the capital city, Bucharest, and a vast hole – at

least 12,000 cubic metres – had been excavated as an entrance to the station. But one morning the civil engineer in charge of the project turned up for work to find that his hole had disappeared. It had been there the night before when he went home at 7pm, but now in its place were trees and park benches on open parkland. At first, the engineer doubted his sanity, and then he asked one of the leader's aides what had happened. Apparently, Ceausescu wanted to make a welcoming speech to new students at Bucharest's polytechnic college and wanted to use the park. So he ordered the hole to be removed until after his speech. All night, hundreds of labourers and machines worked furiously to fill in the hole. Trees were uprooted from other parts of the city and grass was taken from the rest of the park to cover the hole. The job was finished by 6am, thirty minutes before the engineer arrived at work.

The second incident: Ceausescu was given many gifts by visiting VIPs. Among the gifts was a small black Labrador dog from the British Liberal Party leader David Steel. Ceausescu named the dog *Corbu* and became so attached to the animal that Romanian citizens were soon calling it 'Comrade *Corbu*'. Because he was the leader's dog, *Corbu* became a celebrity and soon the dog was seen being driven through Bucharest in a limousine, with its own motorcade. *Corbu* always slept with Ceausescu at night, and during the day it slept in its own luxury villa, a huge dog house complex complete with bed, luxury furnishings, television and telephone. The Romanian ambassador in London was under official orders to go to Sainsbury's [a supermarket] every week to buy British dog biscuits which were then sent back in the official diplomatic bag. *Corbu* was soon given the rank of colonel in the Romanian Army.

We can see from this that Ceausescu must have been a great leader – or can we? He is not nearly as famous as other strong leaders from recent history. Consider Stalin – much better known. In 1938, Stalin attended a Party Congress in the Kremlin in Moscow. There was a standing ovation described by the newspaper *Pravda* as 'it seemed there would be no end'. The proceedings finished with a tribute to Stalin – of course. Everyone got to their feet and started applauding and chanting his name, and no-one dared stop. After 5 minutes, the older people were panting with exhaustion.

After 10 minutes the applause was still continuing and the first person had been carried from the hall on a stretcher. The first man to stop clapping, a local factory director, was arrested the next day and given 10 years on another charge.

At the time it was possible to buy a gramophone record of one of Stalin's longer speeches. It was a very popular present to give people, and it ran to eight sides, or to be more precise, seven sides, because the eighth side consisted entirely of applause.

In 1948, an official biography was written about Stalin. Given the opportunity to make corrections, Stalin added the following note himself, about himself: 'At various stages of the War, Stalin's genius found the correct solution that took account of all the circumstances... His genius enabled him to divine the enemy's plans and defeat them'. And then Stalin made this addition to that addition: 'Although he performed his task of leader of the Party with consummate skill and enjoyed the unreserved support of the entire Soviet people, Stalin never allowed his work to be marred by the slightest hint of vanity, conceit or self-adulation'.

Ceausescu and Stalin were among the most powerful leaders who ever lived. But what good did it do them? On 1st March 1953, Stalin got out of bed at midday (the usual time) in his retreat just outside Moscow. In the pantry down the hall from his bedroom, the light came on: Make Tea. The servants waited and waited for the next light to come on: Bring Tea In. Not until 11pm – 11 hours later – did the staff have enough courage to call someone. When the terrified guards entered Stalin's room, they found him lying in soiled pyjamas, trying to speak but only able to make a buzzing sound. He had had a massive stroke, and as he lay there on the floor, perhaps he was reconsidering the wisdom of his order to have all the Kremlin doctors tortured in jail, and to have his own personal doctor arrested. Stalin died five days later, friendless, lonely, with only a handful of terrified illiterate officials watching.

Ceausescu's ending was even less pleasant. A few months after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the wave of anti-Communist revolution reached Romania in December of that same year. Ceausescu and his wife were captured, taken to a military base in

northern Romania, where, within a few hours, they were taken outside, placed against a wall, and repeatedly shot in the chest. The orders were not to shoot in the head because the images of the bodies must be clearly recognised by the population when they saw them on television. Their still bleeding bodies were then shown on TV as proof that Romania's nightmare was over.

How will Stalin and Ceausescu be remembered a thousand years from now – if at all. After all, the all-powerful Ceausescu was shot less than 16 years ago, but how many of you had even heard of Nicolae Ceausescu before this afternoon?

By now you have probably worked out that I think there are types of leadership than being a dictator. Can we look towards a more noble profession for a better example – say, school principals? (I say 'noble because *I* am a school principal). Let me talk about that a little.

I have a very interesting 216 page book called 'The Romance of School', written by C.J. Prescott in 1932, and it opens with these words at the top of page 1; it says (and I quote):

“Headmasters are naturally in a class of their own... To his (students) he is always an august figure, the more so because the deference paid to him by his staff ... and (this) becomes the model for their imitation. They know that he is the fountain of all authority...” Now, I quite like this book, or at least, I like reading its view of headmasters. In a similar vein, Winston Churchill once said that “Headmasters have powers at their disposal with which Prime Ministers have never been invested”. However, both Churchill's and Prescott's views of headmasters' leadership were fundamentally wrong. They see school principals as arbitrary authority figures, a bit like Stalin I think, whereas a good principal is the opposite. A good principal is a servant – one who serves the needs of others.

For more than 20 years, I used to conduct leadership training camps for students. We would always think about leadership – what it was, how it could be achieved, models of

good and bad leadership. One of the definitions my students often found helpful was from a former Australian Governor General, who had been a General in World War I. His name was Sir William Slim, and he said this: *Leadership is that combination of persuasion, compulsion and example which enables you to get men to do what you want them to do.* My daughter loved that definition – she said that any type of leadership that could get men to do what she wanted was HER kind of leadership! I liked the definition too, but for a different reason – because it recognises that three different types of leadership are needed – persuasion, compulsion, example –in different situations, to achieve different ends, and when you are dealing with different people. There was nothing new in this idea of the highly flexible, servant leader. Over 2000 years ago, the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, who said this: “*A leader is best when people barely know he exists. When his work is done, his aim is fulfilled, they will say ‘We did this ourselves’.*”

Stalin and Ceaucescu saw themselves as strong leaders, but they only used compulsion. As a result, they were probably never really effective leaders because they never won the hearts and minds of those they tried to lead. People were glad when they were gone. They were not respected, they were feared. Is it better to lead by compulsion, or to be a leader who achieves change through persuasion and example? Who do you think achieved more benefits for more people – Mother Teresa or Stalin? Nelson Mandela or Nicolae Ceaucescu? Everyone believes in something, and what that something is, is of incredible importance for the type of leader – the type of person – you will become. A belief in Stalin will create one kind of world, a belief in Mohammed, or Jesus Christ, or money, or the so-called ‘truth’ of science yet another.

The challenge that I want to place before you this morning is to be the very opposite of Josef Stalin or Nicolae Ceaucescu. You are all interested in leadership; that is why you are here – choose leadership that serves others, that leads others by example. Become ‘men and women for others’.

The words are simple, but the task is not. To be ‘men and women for others’, you will want to place the needs of your friends, or your community, or your fellow team members, before your own needs. You will look for ways to serve others, which is what real leadership is all about. You will look at Ceaucescu and Stalin, and do everything you can to be the opposite of those anti-models.

There was a great educator who I admire very much whose name was Kurt Hahn. He was a German by birth, and he started or helped to start the Outward Bound Movement, the Duke of Edinburgh Awards Scheme, the Round Square Movement, the International Baccalaureate and the United World Colleges. He said that we all have much more potential within us than we ever think, and it is only when we push ourselves beyond our comfort zones, right to our limits, that we begin to understand our potential. And Kurt Hahn also said this – if you believe in something, it is not enough to think about it, it is not enough to talk about it, you **MUST** act and make a difference! Being leaders who are ‘men and women for others’ – servant leaders – could have been another way to express that idea of going and making a difference.

So, how do we do it? We give of ourselves for others in a totally unselfish way, even when something inside us says ‘no more’. We are always able to give more of ourselves, whatever we may think to the contrary. In our hearts, we know that we are as lazy as we dare to be.

The challenge of effective leadership has always been to go the extra mile. If we only ever did what was necessary, humanity would have never progressed beyond living in caves. It is the ‘extra’ that we do that allows us to rise above mediocrity.

If leadership is important to you, you will want to work for justice, you will want to make things better for others, you will want to help the oppressed rather than to oppress. It may not be the way many advertisers and the media that surrounds us see the world, but that doesn’t mean it’s not right or important. At a conference I attended a few years ago of IB Heads of Schools in Buenos Aires, the Vice-Chancellors of Argentine universities were asked to comment on those skills which they believed were

lacking among the school students who were being prepared to come into their universities. Most of the Vice-Chancellors spoke for 5 or 10 minutes, but one of them simply stood up, said one sentence, and sat down again. All he said was this: “We want students who can distinguish between truth and consensus”. “We want students who can distinguish between truth and consensus”.

‘Men and women for others’ – at first, it may not seem to make sense in a competitive self-centred world, but without it, our world has a bleak future indeed. Servent leadership may not be the typical view of leadership as power, but it does make ultimate sense. So let me encourage you to rise to that challenge. Make a difference to our world. Don’t complain about it – transform it. Be leaders who are ‘men and women for others’, and by your own example and persuasion, encourage others to join with you.