

## Kończy się świat demokracji

### [The end of the democratic world]

*Donald Tusk, a truly intelligent man, fed us the "hot water on top" line, saying there's nothing better.*

**ŁP:** When we spoke in 2013, you said that "the goals of our politicians and economists are limited to ensuring that economic growth jumps from 1.5 to 4 or 5 percent". You also asked "what difference does this make?". What, then, do you believe should be the role of our politicians?

**MK:** Economic growth is always good; having more money is more comfortable, but it doesn't have much to do with politics. I expect politicians to have imagination, vision. President Komorowski once said that, if a person has visions, the right thing to do is to send them to a psychiatrist. This is a poor response. Politics is ideas, clear views on how to proceed. In other words, a clear perception of what it is that constitutes our community. And yet, from year to year, I feel increasingly less like I live in a community.

**TS:** You've just released a book entitled *We Were Stupid*, repeating the opinions you famously expressed in last year's interview. However, parts of it will nonetheless surprise readers. Said interview was widely received as a manifesto opposing free market capitalism as introduced to Poland post-1989. And yet, in the book, you write: "...losers and people with no talent for doing business, who, afterwards, tried to make political capital out of putting the blame on Balcerowicz and his reforms...and yet he saved our money.". What then is your opinion of Leszek Balcerowicz?

**MK:** 1989 was an extraordinary, an astonishing year and Balcerowicz achieved some incredible things, for which I greatly admire him. It [the Balcerowicz Plan] really was an extremely risky political move and Mazowiecki was afraid of such rapid change. However, if it had been spread over, say, three years, then it would never have been accomplished. People say that when Balcerowicz gave Mazowiecki the IMF loan contract to sign, he said "I don't understand it, it's in English", to which Balcerowicz replied, "you don't need to understand it, you need to sign it". Mazowiecki was furious and ultimately the contract was translated, but that's how Balcerowicz went about things. Realigning the economy had to be done quickly.

**ŁP:** This anecdote illustrates one of the main criticisms of the so-called Balcerowicz Plan. It's said that the reforms were undemocratic and imposed upon the country. It wasn't just Prime Minister Mazowiecki who didn't know what changes he was voting for, the majority of the deputies were also unaware of what they were approving. And, voices are now making themselves heard which suggest that the reforms would never have been passed, had they been subject to a proper public debate.

**MK:** The question is, what do we mean when we say that something is 'democratic'? Was a referendum necessary in this case?

**ŁP:** Not necessarily, but at the time even the country's elected representatives didn't know what they were making a decision on, as they hadn't had time to become acquainted with

the proposed bills.

**MK:** And, do they now know what they're voting for? I suspect not.

**ŁP:** But, they don't vote to change the entire system on a daily basis...

**MK:** I am under no illusions as to the methods applied. I believe that the start set the tone and that later this was difficult to change. Many things simply had to be done, even if in such a brutal and undemocratic fashion as was the case with Balcerowicz. And, he [Leszek Balcerowicz] was the only one brave enough to do what was required. It wasn't therefore a matter of having a discussion with the people, who, at the time, were overwhelmed and barely able to extract themselves from their post-communist destitution. Changes needed to be implemented quickly, with decisions simultaneously being made about which path to take and how to best make use of the traditions of Solidarność – such as those of the Citizens' Committee – to create a different democratic system. At the time, we all thought that it would be great, if Poland were to simply become a Western democracy. We hadn't realised in what a miserable state Western democracies already were. Why would you go to a river, which had already begun to dry up? We needed to try to dig our own river, but we showed a total lack of political initiative. And, back then, Poland could have managed it: the population had already accepted so much, exactly like they then accepted the Balcerowicz Plan, although no-one understood it.

**TS:** What do you really mean, when you say “we were stupid”, who are “we”?

**MK:** “We” designates people such as myself; people from the Citizens' Committee, from the underground, those of us who played a role in the construction of the state. They did three stupid things. First of all, they believed that they could create a system like those in Germany, France or England – just like that, without any political experience, off the cuff, a shiny new democracy. Secondly, they believed that it was necessary to close down the Citizens' Committees and to dispense with the whole sphere which would later come to be known as civil society. Thirdly, they immediately threw each other at one another's throats with the aim of dominating Polish politics.

**ŁP:** You've devoted an extensive section of your book to the Citizens' Committee and you speak of a tumultuous discussion at the last meeting. Do you really think that arguments which Lech Wałęsa and Jerzy Turowicz or Henryk Wujec and Zdzisław Najder had 25 years ago really bear any relevance to people – particularly young people – nowadays?

**MK:** They are relevant because, if the discussions had developed into an attempt at cooperation or the development of another version of democracy, then we could have ended up with a different Poland. Freedom doesn't exist just to be had. Freedom only exists in the sense of freedom which has been made use of, and, in order to make use of freedom, we first have to have some conception of what it is. Leszek Balcerowicz's thinking on this is exactly the same today as it was then: give people freedom and they will immediately be in the position to come to grips with business and public life. Only that's not the case. Freedom consists of the aspiration to something greater and that something needs to be proposed by someone. I don't know whether it would have actually made any difference, however, the thing is that there weren't any proposals. From the time of the

Round Table through to the present day, there is yet to have been one single proposition on the organisation of the political community in Poland.

**TS:** A quarter of a century later the report of that meeting is, however, nothing but history, be it that of an unhappy event. Yet, you portray it as if it alone were the reason that we find ourselves at the current impasse. This is fatalism.

**MK:** No, it's not fatalism. Today, there isn't the slightest chance of Poland opening up to any sort of change which would bring with it that which I believe is of the utmost importance – politics with some actual substance. That was determined at that meeting 25 years ago and since then there has been no other opportunity for change.

**TS:** The way you talk about this period is completely different to how other commentators describe it. As a rule, it's said that it was a time of idealists and aesthetes, who wanted to pursue policies based on values, yet didn't know how to make them work in practice. We had to wait for Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk to see the first post-Solidarność politicians who were capable of moving on from this aestheticism for the sake of efficiency. Do you think that you can be both one and the other – an aesthete and an effective politician?

**MK:** Jerzy Turowicz and Jerzy Giedroyc were top class individuals who wanted to build a Poland based on principles of, if not solidarity, then at least of common decency. Yet, then something terrible occurred, which has remained with us through to the present day: decency metamorphosed into an unbelievable political rivalry. Do you think that opposing political camps argue with each other nowadays? 25 years ago the arguments were ten times as heated. And, the worst thing is that they were about God only knows what.

I'm going to sound a little sanctimonious, but I hope that it won't be for long. After the Round Table, I withdrew from all participation in public life for one very clear reason: I realised how easy it was for me to lie in the pursuit of political goals. I began to lie and I noticed how Jacek Kuroń and Bronisław Geremek, who were sitting next to me, also lied with such ease in discussions which impacted upon their ability to achieve their political goals. Those were noble goals in a fight against obnoxious opponents, and yet, it was all too easy; we were all too comfortable in what we did.

**TS:** Was your departure perhaps a way of escaping responsibility?

**MK:** No...that is to say, maybe it was.

*\*after a long pause\** But that wasn't my shortcoming. Not everyone has to do everything. My shortcoming was more that I didn't try to convince the others – above all myself – of that which I thought. That's a bit how I felt. I had my reasons for turning down the chance to become a deputy [in the Sejm] and that offended some people, for example, Adam Michnik. But, I didn't want to spend any more time in that closed society. I felt that politics needed to be opened up. That's not what happened in the end, but Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Aleksander Hall were of the same opinion. Tadeusz Mazowiecki never was a deputy, it was only later that he accepted the post of Prime Minister and before that he had exactly the same feeling as I did – distaste.

I should have tried to describe it from the very start, to sketch out a vision for a democratic, liberal and alternative Poland – albeit one based upon the country's religious and folk traditions. With that I, of course, don't mean the religious traditions of the Church, but rather those of Polish Romanticism. I didn't do that though and I regret not doing so, however, I have no regrets about withdrawing myself from a position of political responsibility.

**ŁP:** In your book, you emphasise that that particular sort of community was then dismantled and Solidarność's legacy squandered. Jan Sowa also draws attention to this in his book *Inna Rzeczpospolita jest Możliwa!* [*Another Republic is Possible!*], which wants a new Poland to be built on precisely those traditions of the first phase of Solidarność. Isn't there, in both cases, a myth of a golden age?

**MK:** People always idealise. If you want to develop something, then you have to simplify [your description]. But, I'm not talking about that which Sowa doesn't say about the first phase of Solidarność. I had the good fortune to be friends with the people from *Tygodnik Powszechny* – Stanisław Stomma, Jerzy Turowicz, Stefan Kisielewski and Krzysztof Kozłowski. When I on occasion succeeded in getting away from Poland, I used to meet up with Jerzy Giedroyc, Konstanty Jeleński and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński. That was my Poland and it doesn't exist any more. The moment which characterised its passing was the death of Czesław Miłosz. That was the end. Has anyone had anything interesting to say since Miłosz? No. Giedroyc, Mieroszewski and Czapski were the last contributors to the Polish oeuvre and when they went it all went.

**TS:** But Professor, that is a self-contained, intellectual world.

**MK:** It is the world of high culture, which is the only world.

**TS:** Are you not creating the narrative for what were the experiences of a very small group of people?

**MK:** It might have been a very small group of people, but it was always a very small group of the crème de la crème. And, afterwards, their opinions gradually spread throughout the rest of Polish society. You could perhaps say that a particular world emerged, for, if it hadn't formed, then you would have had absolutely nothing to refer to.

**TS:** So, you can't have a revolution without a revolutionary elite?

**MK:** That's got nothing to do with it. Communities, political communities included, are purely cultural constructions. And, if you don't impose high standards upon them, then there aren't any standards. In reality, communities are neither positivist, nor economic, but of the mind. And, all the best Polish minds have passed away.

**TS:** How can you advocate a return to your form of society, to greater equality, and, at the same time, endorse such elitism?

**MK:** That's logical and the one is related to the other. Elitism is inevitable in certain areas, such as in culture and education. And, if you want to build up a new community, then you have to have strong examples to follow. I don't want to test you, but are you familiar with

the *Wielka Improwizacja* monologue? Do you think that Poles in the 19th century knew what it was about? The overwhelming majority certainly wouldn't have and yet without Mickiewicz there wouldn't have been a Poland.

And, it's exactly the same today. Without Miłosz, Jeleński, Czapaki, Giedroyc and Turowicz, Poland will cease to be. That is, unless you young people prove to be up to the job of sustaining it.

I'm a cultural conservative. I know that the times have changed, but [cultural] authorities are still important. Yet, it's a totally different matter when it comes to social issues – here I'm far closer to the socialists.

**ŁP:** And, [are you] a socialist in the realm of economics? The so-called left wing candidates for the presidency presently account for a combined total of 5% of the vote between them and the vast majority of the voters display a belief in the validity of free market politics and push for a reduction in the role of the state. You yourself admit in your book that you knew little of Poland outwith of the intellectual bubble. You also didn't know what the rest of society lived with after Solidarność. Do you not then find that your analyses, both then and now, were, and are, out of touch with the prevailing moods in Polish society?

**MK:** Do you think that the presidential candidates are representative of Polish society?

**ŁP:** They gain signatures and get far more support than any of the left wing candidates.

**MK:** That's as may be, but I really can't see any form of political social movement. Polish political society is asleep and rightly so. If you haven't anything interesting to do, then why not go to sleep. I believe that we've reached a point at which the level of disregard for injustice has reached a stage of helplessness. In other words, this helplessness is dominating everything. I don't want to be revolutionary myself, but at least the Left should be!

The leftist reflex has disappeared, as have all the others, for example, that of the nationalists. That which we can observe nowadays is a sham, an imitation – nothing more.

**ŁP:** Is that the case? In a recent edition of *Gazeta Wyborcza* you warned against admitting people like Grzegorz Braun to public debates, as you said that they constitute a serious threat and one which could rip the system asunder from inside.

**MK:** Grzegorz Braun isn't far right, he's an anti-Semite and anti-Semites shouldn't be given a platform. An end to anti-Semitism! This is the only way to respond to such a phenomenon.

**TS:** On the one hand, you want a public movement, on the other hand, you say that this isn't possible without the participation of an elite. On top of all this, in your book, you refer positively to the experience of Solidarność, which, however, was a grassroots movement, not one led by elites. To me it all seems a little incoherent.

**MK:** Not at all. Solidarność was composed of an elite. An elite doesn't have to be ten people out of ten million, it can also be five million out of 30 [million]. Solidarność was

based on an elite structure, in which hundreds of incredibly active individuals were engaged. That was the living form of the movement, which Lech Wałęsa then brought to an end.

**TS:** What was then at this point Solidarność's greatest capital and how can it be made use of today?

**MK:** Today it would be difficult. Democracy is over and a new process of building links between people and communities needs to begin. And, it needs to be totally different to that which we've had for the last 200 years. Each system goes through phases of youth, maturity and, finally, old age, and our contemporary democracy has reached the last of these three phases. When people get really old they want to be at peace and Europe is old. It's time to think of something new, to "beget a child".

**ŁP:** But with whom? And, on what basis should this new system be built?

**MK:** The critical section of Sowa's book is very good and generally I agree with what he has to say...apart from in the case of positive projects. It's about starting anew and deciding to have a proper go at democracy. Why? In order to bring the reins of power into one's own hands. In such an action lies vitality. This life, this energy is opposed to stability. Each cycle of stabilisation leads to death. It is impossible to imagine democracy in any other way.

I don't know what type of institutions will emerge in this new system. Direct democracy, a lottery or whatever else. That will all be decided by the masses and it doesn't make sense to make assumptions about what they will choose.

**TS:** Does that mean that you consider liberal democracy to be doomed to failure?

**MK:** Without a doubt. It doesn't exist any more, it's over. Right now, what we have is a specific sort of institution, which manages a voting process, within which, however, no semblance of democracy is to be found. When was the last time you came across democracy in action out on the street?

**ŁP:** The textbook example would be that of local activities – of urban movements and societies.

**MK:** And, of course, that's fantastic, but it doesn't change anything.

Although, I'm far from being a Marxist, I think that nowadays we "*trzeba ruszyć ziemską bryłę z posod świata* [need to move this clod of earth from the foundations of the world]". Another reality has crept up on us. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of two worlds – the aristocratic and the democratic. Not systems, but worlds. For him democracy wasn't a system, Tocqueville wasn't interested in who was the president or how Congress worked. He knew that the aristocracy's time was coming to an end and he regretted it a little, as he wanted to take some of its essence with him to the New World. And, it's the same today. A particular world is coming to an end – in this case the one we call democracy – and we need to start to build another.

**ŁP:** But, people want stability...

**MK:** I know that people want stability, but they were coerced into it. Donald Tusk, a truly intelligent man, fed us the “hot water on tap” line, saying that there's nothing better. And, of course, it's always better to get three than two, but why not want five? Life just doesn't make sense unless you do things to a hundred percent.

### **Speakers:**

**Marcin Król** is a professor of philosophy and a lecturer at the University of Warsaw's Institute of Applied Social Sciences. Specialising in the history of ideas, his most recent publications include *Europa w obliczu końca* [Europe on the Brink] (2012), *Klęska rozumu* [The Demise of Reason] (2013) and *Byliśmy głupi* [We Were Stupid] (2015). As a member of Solidarność's Citizens' Committee and a participant in the Round Table talks of 1989, Marcin was also heavily involved in the political events of the late 1980s.

**Łukasz Pawłowski** is a political columnist and the secretary of *Kultura Liberalna*'s editorial team. With a PhD in sociology and a previous degree in psychology, Łukasz conducts interviews on, and writes columns about, Polish and American political life. In 2014, his conversation with Michael Sandel, entitled *Waking from the American Dream*, led to Łukasz winning the National Bank of Poland's prize for the year's best economic interview.

**Tomasz Sawczuk** is a *Kultura Liberalna* employee and a co-founder of the magazine's *Temat Tygodnia* [Theme of the Week] section. He bears responsibility for the finances of the *Kultura Liberalna* Foundation and also contributes commentaries on current political events. A law graduate, Tomasz is presently writing his doctorate at the University of Warsaw's Philosophy Institute.

**This transcript was translated into English by Matthew Cruickshank**