

# The Sense of Reality

## Isaiah Berlin brings a philosophical perspective to practical leadership

by Nicholas Dungan

The intellectual production of Sir Isaiah Berlin constitutes so vast and so varied an *œuvre* that it is not surprising to find, in the compilation of discrete writings gathered together in the book entitled *The Sense of Reality*, a wide diversity of subjects and ideas. Yet its first two essays, 'The Sense of Reality' and 'Political Judgement', offer an uncanny insight into a *sine qua non* of authentic leadership and influence: the willingness, and the ability, to see the facts for what they are.

### *Berlin became the 20th century's great historian of ideas*

Isaiah Berlin was born in Riga, now the capital of Latvia and then a city in the Russian Empire, in 1909, into a wealthy Jewish family of timber merchants. As a child, when he and his parents had moved to Petrograd (today St Petersburg), he witnessed the violence and upheaval of the Russian Revolution firsthand. The family emigrated to England where Berlin attended St Paul's School in London before going up to Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He received a prize fellowship at All Souls at the age of 23 and spent the rest of his career in Oxford, save during the Second World War when he worked for the British government in New York, Washington DC and Moscow. In the 1960s, when he was Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory, Berlin was one of the founders and the first president of the new Wolfson College, Oxford. He was president of the British Academy from 1974 to 1978. He received his knighthood in 1957, and was named to the Order of Merit in 1971. He died in Oxford in 1997, aged 88.

Berlin is probably best known for his essay 'Two Concepts of Liberty' and the distinction he drew between negative liberty, the freedom from oppression or obligation, and positive liberty, the freedom to develop oneself and to make one's own choices. He became, also, the exponent of 'value pluralism', arguing that human values are many and can and do conflict with other values without diminishing the worthiness of individual values themselves. Berlin's intellectual prowess stretches well beyond these two core philosophical elements, making him, in the words of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, an 'historian of ideas, political theorist, educator, public intellectual and moralist, and essayist. He was renowned for his conversational brilliance, his defence of liberalism and pluralism, his opposition to political extremism and intellectual fanaticism, and his accessible, coruscating writings on people and ideas.'

Much of Berlin's work might have been lost were it not for Henry Hardy, who devoted a great deal of his professional career to the painstaking unearthing of Berlin's formidable output, often dispersed or forgotten — a virtually lifelong vocation which Hardy recounts in his charming and illuminating *In Search of Isaiah Berlin*. Without Hardy, more than a million words of Berlin's would almost certainly have remained unfound, uncatalogued and unpublished.

## ***The book *The Sense of Reality* roams through a wide field of knowledge***

Henry Hardy compiled and edited *The Sense of Reality*, first published in 1996, and in it he decided to include, in addition to the two opening essays, writings by Berlin on 'Philosophy and Government Repression', socialism and Marxism, Kant, the Russian legacy of artistic commitment and 'Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality'. Also among the essays is 'The Romantic Revolution: A Crisis in the History of Modern Thought', originally a lecture delivered in Rome in 1960 and a precursor to Berlin's brilliant and revelatory book *The Roots of Romanticism*, from the Mellon Lectures of 1965.

## ***The essays 'The Sense of Reality' and 'Political Judgement' give lessons on leadership***

In 'The Sense of Reality' essay, derived from a lecture delivered at Smith College in October 1953, Berlin takes issue with the 'system-builders' who seek to explain human behaviour in scientific or quasi-scientific terms, or those who wish to duplicate some idealised past. Acknowledging that '[p]lans for human improvement...assume some degree of understanding of the way in which social life occurs', Berlin castigates 'the view that answers...can be provided by formulating general laws, from which the past and future of individuals and societies can be successfully predicted' and instead argues in favour of 'the only method by which anything is ever achieved in practice, whether good or bad, the only method of discovery, the answer to the questions which are proper to historians, namely: What do men do and suffer, and why and how?'

It was in a BBC radio broadcast almost four years later, in June 1957, that Berlin defined the sense of reality more vividly; that broadcast is the text of the essay 'Political Judgement'. 'The gift we mean entails, above all, a capacity for integrating a vast amalgam of constantly changing, multicoloured, evanescent, perpetually overlapping data, too many, too swift, too intermingled to be caught and pinned down and labelled like so many individual butterflies. To integrate in this sense is to see the data (those identified by scientific knowledge as well as by direct perception) as elements in a single pattern, with their implications, to see them as symptoms of past and future possibilities, to see them pragmatically — that is, in terms of what you or others can or will do to them, and what they can or will do to others or to you. To seize a situation in this sense one needs to see, to be given a kind of direct, almost sensuous contact with the relevant data, and not merely to recognise their general characteristics, to classify them or reason about them, or analyse them, or reach conclusions and formulate theories about them.'

He goes on: 'Above all, this is an acute sense of what fits with what, what springs from what, what leads to what.... It is a sense for what is qualitative rather than quantitative, for what is specific rather than general; it is a species of direct acquaintance' with the facts at hand and a feeling for how they fit together and what their implications are. This quality, 'that special understanding ... which successful statesmen have' is in fact an essential prerequisite to any form of leadership or influence. There is no substitute for the willingness, and the ability, to see the facts for what they are; there is no substitute for the sense of reality.