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Educating for a changing world – UK educator attacks ‘dictatorship of self-interest’

Gerald J. Pillay, Vice-Chancellor and Rector of Liverpool Hope University, UK gave this evening’s Caux Lecture on ‘Educating for Change’. Pillay attacked ‘the dictatorship of self-interest and individual rights’. The default setting of our societies was self-interest, he said. ‘Information is not knowledge, and knowledge is not wisdom. We need to nurture wisdom and a sense of judgement. We need to think beyond “cost” to “value” for transformational education,’ the South African-born educator said.

Pillay noted that this ‘time of super-specialization means that we know more and more about less and less’, where often specialists couldn’t talk to each other even within the same faculty. ‘We need a great sense of humility about this century,’ he went on. Francis Fukuyama, the author of *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), had argued that the world was settling on liberal democracy after the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Fukuyama predicted the eventual global triumph of political and economic liberalism. But, Pillay noted, the new century had opened to wars and ethnic cleansing, and the emergence of a new enemy for some in Islam. ‘More and more countries,’ he noted, ‘are pulling up the drawbridge and closing the shutters. The optimism is gone. The world has changed in ways we couldn’t imagine only five years ago.’

The Liverpool-based university rector attacked ‘the commoditification’ of education, using it purely as an instrument of the economy, ‘an industry churning out degrees’. Pillay had seen in South Africa, at the time of apartheid, the dangers of an ideology of education at the service of the state. ‘If we’re not vigilant, the marketization of education could pose similar threats today,’ he said. ‘If education ceases to be a public good, then culture and civilization as we know it could be undermined.’

The rich world, with all its science and technology also nurtures poverty on its doorstep, Pillay continued, noting the high suicide rates as an indicator of social disease. ‘We need a strong grasp of memory and of history,’ he said, while warning of the dangers of ‘short-termism’. The Renaissance was not the fruit of a government programme or a committee, but of creative minds discovering the best of the classical tradition, he noted. And he quoted the example of Mandela preparing himself in prison to become President, taking university degrees without any certainty that he’d ever be able to receive or use them. ‘Without courage, all will fail,’ Pillay concluded.

The Caux Lecture was in the context of the conference ‘Tools for Change’ (25 July – 1 August) which offers skills-building courses in areas such as peace building, conflict prevention, communications, team-building.